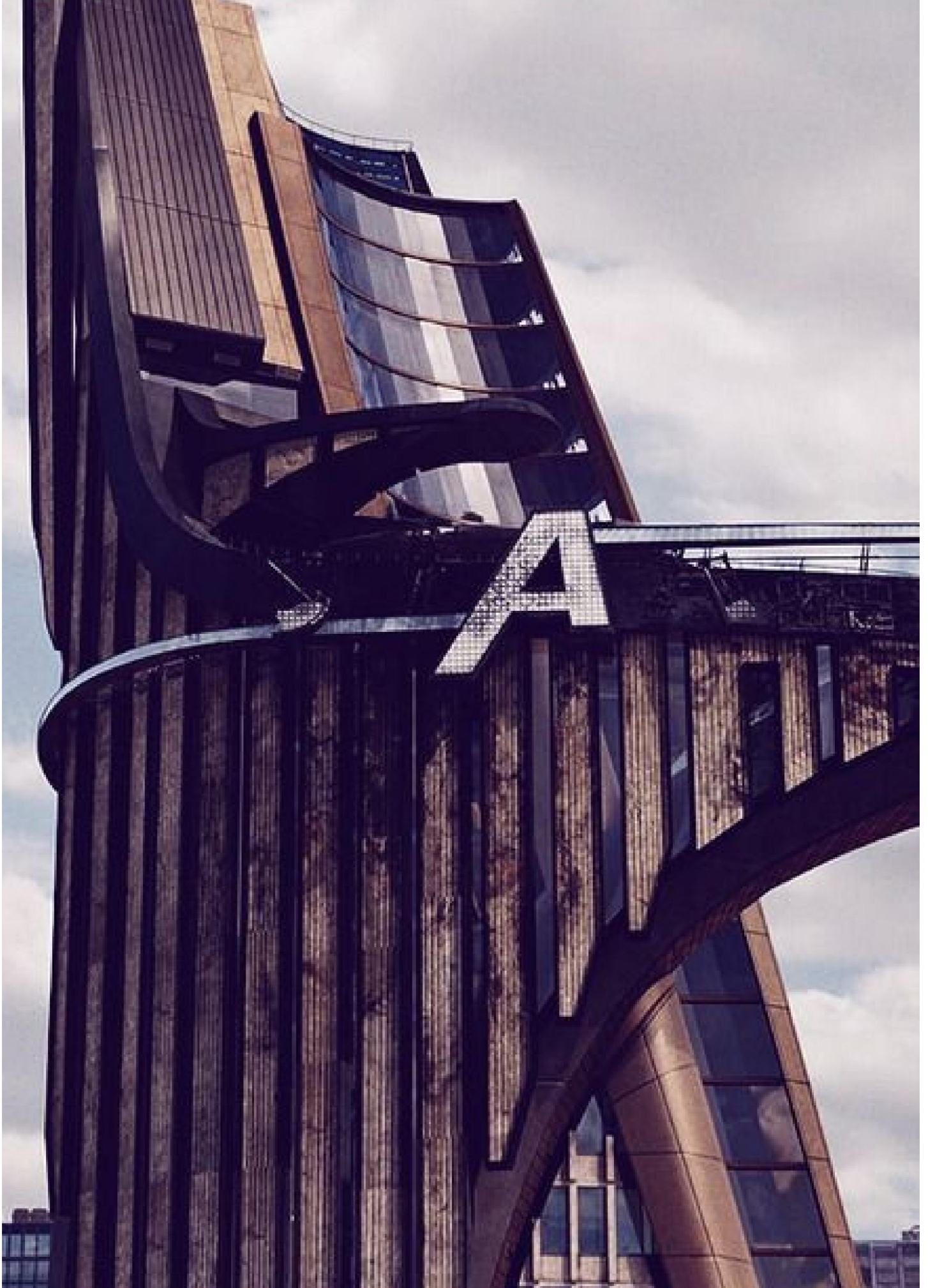


The Third Option

Uncertainty_Principle



Happiness

Part One

A Sudden, Violent Removal

Peter is in the car when it happens, but he doesn't remember anything.

The seat belt, the doctors tell his uncle later, while they think Peter is asleep, broke a few of his ribs, bruised his sternum, and knocked the wind out of him so forcefully it probably also knocked him unconscious the second the car collided with the eighteen-wheeler. No head injuries though, they assure him. Really lucky, considering the state of the car, and its other two passengers. Miraculous, when you think about it. No concussion, no brain damage. The memory loss is a result of the blackout, which was a result of a sudden, violent removal of all of the air from his lungs.

A sudden, violent removal.

Peter might not remember the accident, but he will remember that phrase for a long time.

Uncle Ben comes in a moment later and sees that Peter is awake. He freezes in the doorway, a rumpled blur, far enough away that Peter can only imagine how worn-out his face must be. The impression of grief is somehow sharper than the reality, makes a sensation like swallowing jagged ice arrive in Peter's throat—and then Uncle Ben takes a step toward him and the reality *is* worse.

Of course it is. That's how grief works.

"Hey, Peter," he says. His voice is hoarse. His eyes are red-rimmed. But he's not crying as he sits on the edge of the bed. "You're supposed to be asleep, bud."

"Where are my glasses?" says Peter.

It's not what he means to say. What he means to say is, *Where are my mom and dad?* but his mouth doesn't seem to be taking orders.

Uncle Ben blinks down at him.

"I'm... gonna have to get you some new ones, I think."

“You are?” Peter says.

Why isn't my dad going to do it?

Uncle Ben's adam's apple bobs.

“Yeah, Pete. I am.”

“So I'm going home with you.”

So they're dead.

Uncle Ben nods.

Peter starts to cry. For the first time, it's exactly what he means to do.

After the bandages come off and the physical pain recedes, there's a settling period. A period where the tears, such a welcome relief that first day in the hospital—proof that he still had some control over his own body—become a terrible, unpredictable presence, rising up so suddenly and frequently Peter starts to feel like the sadness controls him instead of the other way around. Peter cries when Ben shows him his new room (which isn't really *new*, because Peter has stayed there when his parents were on business trips and on “family weekends,” but now it's not the guest room, it's *his*). He cries when Ben sets a plate of overcooked spaghetti in front of him their first night together. He cries in front of his whole fifth-grade class on his very first day, because apparently no one told the teacher's aide why he transferred and the first thing she does when she introduces him is ask him to tell the class what his parents do for work.

(A kid named Flash laughs at him for it at recess. Another kid, Ned, tells Flash to eat dirt. It's the one good thing to come out of the day.)

But there are other times it happens, too. Weird times, times when Peter isn't thinking about his parents or even thinking about anything at all—and suddenly there are hot tears pouring down his cheeks, or he's reaching for his inhaler, his lungs suddenly empty. It happens while he's doing his homework, teardrops turning fractions into smudges of graphite. It happens while he's watching Spongebob on a Saturday morning.

He tries to hide it from Ben. Not all of it: that would be impossible. But the unexplained tears, at least, he tries to cover up by rushing to the bathroom or turning away until they stop. Peter doesn't want Ben to ask why he's crying, because *Peter* doesn't know, and he's afraid if he can't explain it, Ben will think he's broken.

Peter's afraid he might *be* broken.

And besides, he knows Ben didn't ask for this.

Peter has always liked Ben *a lot*. Whenever he would come here before they would watch old black-and-white horror movies with Ben's wife, or Ben would take him to Coney Island, or they would fix things together in the rusty old storage unit Ben rents in Jersey... but even at ten years old, Peter knows there's a difference between a day at the fair and having to live with a kid twenty-four seven. Whenever those inexplicable tears rise, Peter remembers something Ben used to say

when he would drop him off at the end of one of those weekends: *I do not know how you people keep up with this little Tasmanian devil. Thank goodness I'm allowed to give him back.*

Ben said it like it was a joke. His parents used to laugh. *Peter* used to laugh. He thinks he did. But looking back now, he can't quite remember the inflection, and when he tries to recall the expression on Ben's face when he said things like that, the memory-Ben's face goes all shadowy, like one of the monsters in those old horror flicks.

What if Ben still wants to give him back?

So Peter hides this maybe-brokenness. He hides it in fogged-up bathroom mirrors and sleeves pressed to his mouth and half-hidden glances when his uncle isn't looking. He hides it well, he thinks.

Until, one day, he can't.

They're walking down the boys' aisle at Ross. Ben is looking around like a man who's just been suddenly transported to an alien planet, and Peter is trailing after him, running his hands over shirts that are too large because they are in the 10-12 section and Peter still wears 7-9, even though he will be eleven in just a few months. It's the first time they've had to buy clothes since the accident. This is fine. They're just clothes. Peter has had to buy tons of clothes before, and he'll have to buy tons more in the future. He didn't even *like* shopping when he used to go with his mom. In fact, he hated it. And this feeling he has, like he's going to become a stranger if he has to give up his old t-shirts—someone his parents wouldn't recognize on the street, if they ever saw him—doesn't make any sense, because his parents are dead.

It doesn't make any sense, so neither does the fact that right as Ben turns to examine the tag on a shirt with a green cartoon superhero on it, Peter starts to sob.

"I'm sorry," he says, as Ben drops to one knee in front of him, grabbing him by the shoulders and looking into his face like he expects Peter to suddenly disappear. "I'm sorry."

"Peter," says Ben, "Peter, buddy, what's going on? Are you hurt?"

Peter shakes his head. The tears on his cheeks are so thick they go flying in every direction.

"I just—I just—I don't know," he admits, when no other words will come. "I don't know. I don't know." He presses his hands to his eyes, knocking his glasses off. Peter hears them clatter to the linoleum floor, but neither of them retrieve them. "Please don't be mad."

"Mad? Peter, honey, why would I be mad?"

Ben has never called him honey before. Peter's dad never used the word. He only ever called him "pal," or "buddy," which is what Ben has done too, until now.

The strange endearment makes Peter look up. Ben doesn't look mad. He looks... scared. Tired. But not mad.

"I'm sorry you have to do this," Peter whispers, finally. "I'm sorry you have to take care of me."

Ben's eyes turn to water. It's scary, and Peter stops crying abruptly.

"Honey," Ben says again. "*No.*"

Ben tightens his grip on Peter's shoulders. He looks at the floor, just for a second to compose

himself, and his tears meet Peter's on the ground.

When he looks up, his expression is fierce.

"Peter," he says, "what happened to your parents... that was the worst thing that's ever happened to me." Peter flinches. "But you? You're the absolute best. The greatest gift I've ever gotten. I will always, always want you. Do you understand me?"

Things start to get better after that.

It turns out Ben knew about the hidden tears. Pretty much all of them—he just wasn't sure what the best way to approach them was. He'd opted for giving Peter space, but after the incident at Ross, he switches tack.

"You look sad," he says, whenever Peter gets the distant look on his face that says an episode is arriving. "Do you want to talk about it?"

At first, Peter does not. Ben doesn't push, but he also doesn't let him hide. When the tears are silent, they sit together and watch TV wait for them to peter out. When they're not so silent, Ben hugs him and shushes him and Peter doesn't even mind that it makes him feel like a little kid because that's how he *feels* when it happens and when he feels like that all he really wants is a hug.

His parents were never huggers, besides a quick squeeze before bed, or after a school play. Peter never resented it, or even really thought about it, but he's glad that Uncle Ben is different. He seems to like giving Peter hugs. Sometimes he asks for it even when Peter isn't crying, and after a while Peter stops feeling guilty when he asks for them too.

"Are you happy, Peter?" Ben asks him one day while they're both on the couch. The TV is off. They're both reading identical copies of *Where the Red Fern Grows*, even though Ben's eyelids are drooping from his double shift, because it's Ben's month to lead the parent reading group at Peter's school.

"Not really," says Peter, frowning at the book. "It's a super depressing story, Uncle Ben."

Ben smiles, and some of the tiredness leaves his face.

"Just wait 'til next month, they're gonna make you read *Bridge to Terabithia*." He closes his copy, sets it on the coffee table. "But I wasn't talking about the book. I mean... just in general, I guess. Are you happy?"

Peter's frown deepens. Ben has never asked him before. He sometimes asks why Peter is sad, but only when he's having a moment.

"Uh, yeah," he says, nervous. "I mean, sure."

"No, that's not what I meant," Ben says. "I'm not looking for any particular answer, Pete. I really want to know. The truth, I mean. Are you happy?"

Peter gets that feeling in the back of his throat, the one that usually signifies tears are on their way. He looks at his book, shrugs. Pretends to read in the hope that Ben will drop it.

Ben does not. He puts a hand on Peter's book and waits until Peter looks up at him.

"Pete," he says. "You know, grief doesn't have a timeline. You're allowed to be sad as long as you need to be."

Peter swallows.

"I *want* to be happy, though," he says. "I mean, it's not like... I *like* living here. It's just..."

"It's just not your parents' house."

Peter nods.

Ben takes a breath. "I want you to know," he says, "that's okay. And if you're feeling sad, you can tell me... you can tell me *before* it gets bad. My feelings won't be hurt. In fact, it would make *me* really happy to know you can trust me. Would that be okay?"

Peter pretends to consider the question for a minute, but really he's just biting down until the razor in his throat goes away and he's able to smile, just a little.

"You're a weird guy, Uncle Ben."

Ben hugs Peter to his side.

"Sure am, Pete."

Peter sort of expects Ben to ease off after their talk, but instead he digs in.

"Are you happy?" he asks, when Peter is putting the final touches on his science fair project.

"Are you happy?" he asks, when Peter emerges, red-eyed, from a particularly long shower.

"Are you happy?" he asks, nearly every day when he arrives home from work.

At first, Peter just shrugs. Ben never pushes, at least not in the moment. But the question always comes back, and after a while, without thinking about it, Peter starts to answer honestly.

"I don't know," he says over dinner, because he isn't sure why the smell of mac and cheese makes him want to run to his room (he will figure out, later, that it's because his mom only made mac and cheese when he was sick, or for his birthday).

"Not today," he says, on a day when Flash stuffed him in a locker after gym, even though Ned rescued him pretty much instantly.

"No," he says, on the first anniversary of his parents' death.

He says it a lot around that time.

But the anniversary passes. Things keep moving. He grows out of all of his old clothes, but he discovers he really likes the ones Ben buys as replacements, which are covered in science puns. Flash continues to torment him—after one particularly illuminating health class, he dubs him

“Penis Parker,” and unfortunately it sticks—but he and Ned get closer, enough that Ned, whose mom is *strict*, as he puts it, starts spending most afternoons at the Parker apartment. Ben gets better at cooking spaghetti, graduates to burgers and, eventually, can even make a slightly-blackened chicken parm.

“I’m not so bad,” says Peter, when Ben asks after he wins an award for his essay on *Bridge to Terabithia*.

“I think so,” he says, on his first day of middle school, and Peter tries to pretend he doesn’t notice how hard Uncle Ben is trying to control his expression as he waves goodbye.

Over winter break that year, Ben takes him to Rockefeller center to see the tree, and to ice skate. Peter’s never been—when he was little he would get sick every time he stayed outside for more than fifteen minutes in the winter. But he’s grown a lot in the last year, even though he’s still the smallest kid in his class, and he’s only had a few colds since summer. He’s hardly had to use his inhaler in the last six months, either, and it’s this improvement that makes Ben take the risk, though he still bundles Peter up until he looks like nothing so much as the Stay-Puft Marshmallow man from *Ghostbusters* (one of their favorites) before taking him out.

Peter is... not a great ice-skater. Ben, who played hockey in college, tries his best to coax him through the basics, holding his hands and dragging him upright every time he stumbles, but, unsurprisingly, the general gracelessness with which Peter lives the rest of his life extends to the ice rink, and by the time they break for lunch he’s covered in a symphony of little bruises in spite of his fifteen layers of clothing.

“We can go home,” Ben offers, approaching Peter where he’s waiting on a bench and handing him a cocoa and a hot dog. “I promise I won’t be offended if ‘Olympic figure skater’ isn’t written in the stars for you.”

Peter has been looking at the tree, which has to be five stories high and is glittering with gold and silver tinsel, brilliant even though it isn’t lit. His gaze goes to a family on the ice as he takes the food. The dad is skating backward, dragging his son around while his mom and sister cheer from the sidelines. *Me and Ben looked like that*, Peter thinks, and even though there’s no mom and sister there to clap for him, it doesn’t make him want to cry. In fact, it makes him smile.

He looks at his uncle as Ben takes a seat next to him, puffing into his mittened hands.

“Hey, Ben?”

“Yeah, bud?”

“I’m really happy.”

He doesn’t mind when Ben looks away, coughing roughly. He knows, finally, that tears aren’t always bad.

Uncle Ben was married once.

Peter remembers Ben’s wife, who was his aunt for a while. He remembers that for a long time she would come with them to all the carnivals and movies, and they would all laugh when either she or

Ben tried to make dinner because they were both such bad cooks. He remembers that Ben smiled a lot when she was around—more than he smiles now, even though things are getting easier since the accident. Peter liked her *a lot* too, but she was gone before Peter came to live with Ben.

Divorce, his mom had explained to him. *It happens sometimes. It wasn't anybody's fault.*

She meant it as a comfort—*no one fought, so there's no need for you to be scared*—but for Peter it had the opposite effect: he wondered if his parents could just *happen* to get divorced, too. If it's no one's fault, could it come at any time?

Divorce. A big, neon-red word, written on a guillotine in Peter's imagination. For a long time, it felt like the worst thing that could possibly happen.

It's a lot less scary now.

Still, Peter is twelve years old before he gets up the courage to ask. And then it's not so much *courage* as it is his *inability to shut up*, which has become an increasing problem as Peter has gotten older.

"Why did you and May break up?" he blurts one night at dinner, and then goes as red as the cherry tomatoes in his wilted salad, at which he immediately and intensely stares.

Ben puts down his fork—surprise, like many of Ben's expressions, appears mildly. He considers Peter for a moment.

"Can you always tell when I've been talking to her?" he asks.

Peter's ears feel hot. He stirs his salad.

"Yeah. I mean, kinda. You get this look on your face, I guess. And you get all quiet and stuff." Peter shrugs. "Sorry. We don't have to talk about it."

But when he glances at Ben's face his uncle doesn't look mad.

"You know," he says, "a lot of really smart kids aren't so great when it comes to emotional intelligence. Why couldn't you be one of those kids?"

Peter smiles. "Sorry Uncle Ben. I guess I'll, uh... try to be stupider?"

Ben shakes his head and smiles back. "Nah, I like bragging about you too much," he says. The smile fades a little. "That's what May and I were talking about. I was telling her about how they want to bump you up a grade in math."

"You guys talk about *me*?"

Ben nods. He's watching Peter's face like he's expecting something, but Peter isn't sure what it is. He's too busy feeling surprised to think about it.

"She remembers me?" says Peter.

"Who could forget an ugly mug like that?"

"Ha, ha." Peter rolls his eyes. Frowns. "If you guys talk, why did you get divorced? Doesn't talking mean you still like her?"

"I do still like her," says Ben. "She's a very special woman."

“So why don’t you get married again?”

Peter can tell right away he’s said the wrong thing. Ben’s expression doesn’t exactly *fall*, but it does slide a little, becoming fixed. Peter swallows and forces himself not to look back at his plate while Uncle Ben works on his response.

“Sometimes,” he says slowly, “staying together isn’t just a matter of love. Sometimes two people can love each other very much and it just... doesn’t work out. Does that make sense?”

Peter doesn’t feel very hungry anymore. He drops his fork and slides lower in his chair.

“Peter,” says Ben. “I’m not talking about us, buddy. Romantic love is different than what you and I have. We’re family.”

“When you get married you’re *supposed* to be family.”

Ben is quiet for such a long time that Peter eventually tries to steal a glance at him from under his lowered brow. Ben raises an eyebrow.

“Does it bother you that it’s just us?” he says.

“*No*.” Peter clambers to sit straight. “No, I’m... this is great. I’m not, like, trying to complain about my life or whatever. It’s just.” He chews his lip. “Okay. So, you ask me all the time if I’m happy, right? Like, so much it gets annoying.”

“Hey, I’m just trying—”

“I know, I know. You’re making sure I’m okay. It’s cool, Uncle Ben. But... are *you* happy? I mean, I know I make you happy, don’t freak out. But are you *happy* happy?” He shrugs again. “I guess that’s all I wonder about.”

Ben doesn’t say anything else. But he does get a little furrow between his eyes, which Peter knows only happens when he’s thinking hard.

A few months after that, May comes to visit. She only stays for a week, but they go to the beach together, and see a play, and even walk around Times Square in spite of the tourists, because May says she misses New York. Gloucester, where her family lives, is not the same.

“There are more lobsters than people,” she says. “All I want is a New York hot dog, and I swear all I can find is lobster rolls.”

She laughs when Uncle Ben buys her a lobster roll for lunch, laughs harder when he produces the hot dog he was hiding behind his back the whole time.

“We’re just friends,” Ben says, after May leaves.

“Uh-huh,” says Peter, and he pretends he doesn’t notice how much more Ben smiles over the next few weeks. Even when he thinks Peter isn’t looking.

May comes once more that summer. And twice in the fall.

Ben smiles a lot during this time.

It's nice, Peter thinks, when they're *both* happy.

After a while, though, May stops visiting.

"Peter," Ben snaps, when Peter asks *why* for the thousandth time, "not everything has a *why*, okay? Sometimes, things are just hard."

"That's stupid," says Peter.

"That's *life*, pal."

Peter slams the door when he retreats to his room. He expects his uncle to come after him, like he usually does. But he doesn't.

Early that spring, Uncle Ben loses his job.

He finds two more to replace it, but the money still isn't as good, and it means he's not home as much. Peter does his homework alone after Ned leaves, and some nights he's too tired to wait up until he hears the click of the door to signify his uncle is home.

Just like after his parents died, Peter starts to feel things without knowing why.

Except this time, it's not tears that arise. It's a hot feeling in his chest, a stickiness in his throat that feels like it won't go away unless he shouts, and sometimes he does. He shouts when Uncle Ben tells him off for not doing the dishes. He shouts when he can't go on the eighth grade retreat and Ben won't even give him a good reason why.

When he isn't shouting, he's quiet.

So is Ben.

One night, Peter is lying in bed, watching the numbers on his digital clock tick closer to midnight, listening for the door, and he thinks, *I don't have to stay here*.

So he puts on his sneakers, his jacket, and he slips out the back window and down the fire escape,

not really knowing where he's going until he's at the twenty-four hour convenience store around the corner. He buys a Coke and a pack of gummy worms with his allowance, and feels a little thrill when the guy behind the counter doesn't even glance at him as he shoves Peter's change through the bulletproof glass.

He takes his prize home and eats it on the fire escape, and when the door finally opens around one in the morning, he crawls back through his window and into his bed. But Ben goes straight to his own room without checking on Peter, and a second later he hears the springs in the mattress creak as Ben climbs into bed.

For once, it's nice not to think about why he's doing what he's doing. It's nice not to think about how it makes him feel.

Peter just *leaves*.

A few months later, Ben is the one who leaves.

Peter slips out of the ratty old chair next to the deputy's desk, where he's been sitting for the past three hours. The deputy disappeared an hour ago. In the middle of the night, the rest of the bullpen is almost empty.

Peter tiptoes past the room's only other occupant: the detective who brought him in, asleep at his desk. He opens the door just wide enough to slip through and heads straight for the payphone he saw there earlier, digging a fistful of quarters out of his jeans as he does.

(Peter had gone to the arcade.)

The quarters sound like a hammer on an anvil as he drops them into the slot.

(Ben had been on a night shift. Peter, bolder with his nighttime excursions with each passing week, took a bus to the arcade, not realizing it stopped running at midnight.)

The finger Peter uses to dial is still crusty with blood. He'd scrubbed as much as he could off on the towel the deputy gave him, but it's under his fingernails. His hands shake as he presses the ancient buttons.

Peter only has two numbers memorized, and the first one is Ben's. He dials the second.

(He thought he'd walk home. It wasn't like Ben checked on him most nights, anyway. He could make it home before three am if he walked fast. But he'd barely made it two blocks before his cell phone rang.)

"Hello?" says a woman's voice on the other end.

Peter can't speak. He's been telling police officers what happened all night. Now, when it matters, he can't say it again.

(For once, Ben's expression was not mild.)

"Hello?" says the voice again. "I don't know if you can hear me, but I can't hear you."

("Jesus Christ," Ben said when he spotted him. "Jesus Christ, Peter, it's like you have no sense of your own limits. Do you have any idea how dangerous this city can be late at night?")

"It's me," Peter whispers.

("You act like nothing bad's ever happened to me," Peter said, ashamed but covering it in annoyance. "You didn't have to come all the way out here. I could have walked.")

A pause.

"Sorry, say again?"

("Like hell you could have. You're thirteen years old! In this neighborhood, past dark? You might be smart, kiddo, but dammit, sometimes you are dumb.")

"It's me." Just a little louder. "Peter."

"Peter? Honey, what's wrong? It's the middle of the night. Where are you calling from?"

Peter swallows.

"Can you come get me?"

("I thought you said I was smart at everything.")

"Yeah." Ben walked quickly, not bothering to cover his own annoyance. "And you act like it means you can do whatever you want. Intelligence isn't just a free pass to make your teachers feel stupid and skip out on studying, or to... to manipulate me so you can sneak out of my house. Your smarts are a gift, Peter, but any gift is also a responsibility.")

"What happened, Peter?"

Her voice is sharp. Panic rising.

("Maybe I don't want to be responsible all the time. Maybe I don't like being the biggest dork at school, Uncle Ben, did you think of that? Maybe sometimes I just want to have fun.")

Peter's is flat, as dull as hers is dangerous.

"Ben is dead," he says.

(Ben turned around, leaving his back open to the dark mouth of the alley up ahead. "Responsibility," he said, "is not a choice.")

"He got shot."

A long, long silence. Then—

"Peter. I'm coming to get you, okay? I'm coming to get you."

A hand falls on his shoulder just as their time runs out. The phone clunks as it drops the call. Peter turns toward the officer's stern but sympathetic face.

"Your guardians are here, son," the officer says.

May never does show up.

Self Defense

“You’ll sleep here.”

Mr. Arlington tosses the duffel bag onto a twin bed in the corner of the basement, and the springs in the mattress scream their protest. There’s a light bulb on a long orange extension cord swinging idly overhead. The laundry machine and dryer are just a couple feet away from the head of the bed.

Peter sits next to the duffel bag and says nothing.

Mr. Arlington is a short, heavy man with no hair on his head but a lot on his arms, which he crosses over his chest as he stares down at Peter. He seems to be waiting for Peter to say something, but Peter’s mind is completely empty, an endless plane of scratchy white.

“No thank you, then?” says Mr. Arlington after a while. “Is this just what I should expect from here on out?”

Peter doesn’t even have the energy to feel indignant. He shrugs.

Mr. Arlington scoffs and stomps up the stairs. When he reaches the upper floor of the condo, Peter tracks his progress from the living room to the kitchen by watching the dust that trickles through the floorboards—his ceiling.

Mr. and Mrs. Arlington are his cousins, they told him at the station, though probably a few times removed. His last living relatives. A real bitch to track them down, according to the deputy. They’ve agreed to take Peter in while everything is sorted out, isn’t that nice of them?

What do they have to sort out? Peter wanted to know.

All kinds of things. Uncle Ben’s will. What will happen to his apartment, his things. Where Peter is going to spend the rest of his life.

The rest of his life. The concept feels just as scratchy and blank to Peter as his other thoughts. He lays down on the twin bed and immediately sinks into the deep indent at the center of the ancient mattress. Reaches automatically for his phone, then realizes it was taken into evidence, because it was covered in blood.

He can’t call May again. He doesn’t know if he would anyway. He already feels hot with shame at their earlier conversation, shame that boils over when he remembers how he stared at the doors to the precinct while he waited for the officer who gathered his things to come back with them and hoping harder than he’d ever hoped for anything that she would appear.

But why would she? Besides those few weeks last year—and a few sporadic weekends in his childhood—they barely know each other. Just because Peter likes her doesn’t mean she would want to... to...

Peter rolls over, lets the thought roll away as he does. His duffel bumps against his knees, but he can’t bring himself to look inside yet. They didn’t even let him pack his own things.

Eventually there are footsteps at the top of the stairs, but they don’t come further than the landing. There is a click. The swinging bulb goes out, leaving Peter in the dark.

He waits for the tears to come, like they did with his parents.

Instead, two thoughts, black as iron, come jolting out of the white.

The first: *Uncle Ben is dead.*

The second: *It's my fault.*

He doesn't sleep for a long time.

The cousins don't tell Peter anything about themselves. He doesn't know what they do for work. He doesn't know if they have kids of their own. He doesn't even know if they're married or if they're brother and sister, though he leans toward the latter. They have the same foreshortened stature, like someone cut them off at the knees, the same manner of crossing their arms over their chests when they look at him.

"Dinner is at six every evening," Mrs. Arlington tells him. "If you miss it, you wait until breakfast. No snacking between meals. School provides a lunch for kids like you, so you'll take advantage of that, got it?"

This is how she introduces herself.

While she talks, Mr. Arlington comes stumping up the basement steps, carrying Peter's duffel bag. He drops it on the floor in front of Mrs. Arlington and the pair of them rifle through it, mussing up Peter's neatly-folded clothes.

Peter watches them silently, with an intense feeling that he is not here in this dusty, ancient apartment, but rather somewhere very far away, somewhere outside of New York. Maybe a different planet.

He's still wearing the clothes they gave him at the precinct. They're too big, and smell like mildew. He watches the clothes that Uncle Ben bought for him pile up at his feet but can't bring himself to touch any of them. There's still blood under his fingernails.

The cousins pocket his wristwatch, the debit card Ben gave him for emergencies—which has about a hundred bucks on it—and a nineties-era Nintendo GameBoy the officer must have grabbed off of Peter's desk. Peter doesn't tell them it's worthless. He plucked it out of the garbage weeks ago, thinking he and Ben might fix it together, but he and Ben had been going through one of their silent periods ever since, so it still doesn't work.

When the bag is thoroughly overturned, the cousins sit back, wearing identical expressions of disappointment.

Mr. Arlington tosses the duffel bag at him. Peter stumbles as he catches it.

"Go take a shower," he says. "I called the school this morning, they're setting you up. If you hurry you can make a half day."

Peter goes to the bathroom. He hopes the shower covers the sound of vomiting, which lasts a long time.

The middle school in this neighborhood is underfunded and overcrowded. Half of his teachers don't even notice they have a new student, too busy trying to control the daily chaos. Peter spends his first half day bouncing off of other students' shoulders in the hallway, keeping his head down to avoid stares and jeers and not realizing why he's getting them until he ducks into the bathroom before seventh period and sees his face in the graffiti-covered mirror. It's deathly-pale, and his cheeks are streaked with tears he didn't know were happening.

Uncle Ben is dead.

It's my fault.

Peter wipes his face and heads back into the halls, which are crowded with strangers.

About a week after he goes to live with the cousins, they get a visit from Peter's social worker.

When she arrives, Peter feels a little flare of hope—the first identifiable emotion he's had since that night outside the alley. Surely she'll see that his bed is at least fifty years old, and that the clunk of the pipes over it keeps him up all night. Surely she'll notice that the cupboards are nearly bare but the liquor cabinet is fully stocked, that the meals the cousins *do* give him are all TV dinners, that the whole duplex smells like cat litter. She'll see and she'll send him somewhere better, a proper foster family.

But the social worker doesn't say anything as she totters around the apartment. She's middle-aged and has a slight limp, and somehow she looks more exhausted than Peter feels. When she examines his corner of the basement she merely nods and ticks something off on her clipboard. Peter thinks she will say something about the fridge, but when she opens it, someone has filled it with food—and she nods again.

"Well, Peter," she says when she's finished, already pulling her jacket on as she heads for the front door, "your cousins have agreed to sign a temporary guardianship agreement, so it looks like you can stay here for a while. I'll get everything drawn up. Do you need anything before I leave?"

She looks from Peter to the cousins, who are standing on either side of him like squat caricatures of the royal guard, with an expression on her face just short of pleading.

"I think we're just fine," says Mr. Arlington, squeezing Peter's shoulder.

The social worker sags with relief and beats a hasty retreat, before any of them can change their minds.

(Are you happy, Peter?)

No one is coming to save him.

The kids at Peter's new school hate him. Within a few weeks he's established himself as a know-it-all, totally accidentally. But the classes here are all a few grade levels behind what he's used to—Peter wouldn't be able to fail them if he tried.

He doesn't want to try. Schoolwork is the only distraction he has, because the cousins don't have a computer, or even any books, and Peter finds that when he isn't distracted his mind starts to hum like it did that first night, that white space taking on a sharp edge that is too untenable for him to examine.

He gets shoved in the hallway between classes. A girl a foot taller than him smacks his lunch out of his hands every day if he doesn't get to a table and scarf it down fast enough. A boy who must have been held back at least three times—judging from his beard—full-on punches him in the face while they wait for the bus one afternoon. Doesn't even offer an explanation. Just breaks Peter's glasses, and possibly his nose, and gets on the bus.

Despite all this, school becomes Peter's refuge.

The cousins' duplex—he can't stomach the thought of calling it home—is the worst place Peter has ever been. Never mind that he barely sleeps, or that he goes to his creaky, awful bed with an empty stomach every night, or that the cat smell is starting to seep into his clothes, making him even more of a target at school. It's the *tension* that makes it unbearable.

Mr. Arlington seems to have some sort of job, because he's usually not there when Peter gets home from school. Mrs. Arlington, on the other hand, does nothing but sit on the couch all day watching soap operas, taking breaks only to shuffle into the kitchen to make another screwdriver, which is her drink of choice.

Once, Peter tried to sit on the couch to do his homework, the light in the basement being too dim, and upon finding him there she smacked him across the back of the head with a rolled-up Cosmo.

"You're blocking the TV," she slurred, and it took all of Peter's self-control not to run as he headed back to the relative safety of his underground bedroom.

In spite of Peter's immediate retreat, Mrs. Arlington seems to get a taste for hitting him after that.

She takes to carrying a magazine around with her wherever she goes. If she catches Peter in the kitchen—*smack*. If he forgets to take his shoes off at the door—*smack*. If he misses one of his chores (laundry, cat litter, scrub the toilet, sweep the floors, wipe the dust off the television)—*smack*.

It never leaves a mark. It *does* leave Peter with an achy nervousness that never goes away when he's in the apartment, because he's always waiting for the next blow to fall.

When Mr. Arlington gets home in the evenings, he and Mrs. Arlington scream at each other for a while before they go to bed. Peter is usually in the basement at this point, but it always makes the ache worse, makes it that much harder to fall asleep while he stares at the trails of dust moving across the ceiling.

(*Are you happy, Peter?*)

No, Peter thinks. Then, *But that's my own fault, isn't it?*

“Psst.”

Peter is walking back to the Arlington’s from school. He doesn’t take the bus anymore, partly because of the bearded boy, but mostly because it gets him there too quickly.

He glances over his shoulder, thinking a bee might be following him. Nothing. He resumes walking.

“*Pssst.*”

Peter turns around.

This time, Ned Leeds’ round face materializes from behind a dumpster.

“*Ned?*”

“Shh!”

Peter blinks a few times, thinking he’s crazy, but it’s definitely Ned: he’s wearing his Midtown Middle School gym t-shirt and carrying the lunch box Peter got him for Christmas last year, which has a picture of the Hulk—Ned’s favorite superhero—and says “*Hulk Smash Lunch!*” in bright green letters.

Peter stares.

“What are you doing here?” he says blankly.

Ned glances over his shoulder, then jerks his head at a nearby alley, and Peter follows him down it automatically, with the surreal feeling that he has somehow stepped into a vivid dream. Only when they are safely concealed behind a second set of dumpsters does Ned round on him.

He pulls Peter into a bone-crushing hug.

“Oh my God,” he says. “Oh my God, Peter, I’m *so sorry* about Ben.”

Peter only realizes how stiffly he’s been holding himself—for days, for weeks... since Ben died—when he finally releases, melting into Ned’s shoulder like ice on warm concrete. It takes a second to hug back, but when he does Ned squeezes tighter, and doesn’t let go until Peter does.

They break apart, and Ned looks Peter up and down, face falling.

“Dude,” he whispers, “you look terrible.”

Peter looks down. Now that Ned mentions it, his clothes do look especially large on him, but he hasn’t noticed until now.

“Why are we whispering?” he says when he looks up.

Ned glances over his shoulder again.

“I’m not supposed to be here,” he says. “I told my mom I’m going to the decathlon team meet and greet at the high school—so I guess now I have to join decathlon next year—but actually I took the bus.”

“And you think... you think your mom is going to overhear us? Here?”

“Dude, you know my mom has ears freaking everywhere. I’m pretty sure I saw her standing over me in my bed the other night, just breathing. She was probably waiting to hear what I say in my sleep.”

Something strange is happening to Peter’s face. It feels tight all of a sudden, but not in an unpleasant way.

It takes him a second to realize he is smiling.

“How did you know where to find me?” he asks.

“Uh, it was *not* easy, actually. Did you know your phone’s been disconnected? So I went to Principal Sanders but all she said was that you transferred and she didn’t know where. Then I tried to call the police station but they wouldn’t tell me anything, so I emailed CPS, but they were all like, ‘who wants to know, don’t bother us again,’ so I had to find a backdoor into their servers and steal the address of your foster family and *then* I had to figure out my cover story—”

“You did all that?” Peter says. “Ned, that’s seriously impressive.”

Ned waves him off.

“Peter, why didn’t you try to get in touch with me?”

“My phone—”

“Uh, yeah, it’s the twenty-first century. Ever heard of a computer?”

Peter’s smile slips. He looks at his shoes, which are nearly too small for him now, though he can’t imagine asking the Arlingtons for new ones.

The truth is, he thought about emailing Ned, those first few weeks. There are computers in the school library, even though they’re about ten years old and chained to the desks with steel bike locks. But every time he logged on to one he just sat there, too frozen to even open his inbox.

“I...” Peter says, then shuts his mouth and stares at Ned until his friend’s expression of slight irritation gives way completely to worry.

“Peter,” he says. “What has been going *on* , dude?”

Peter’s tongue comes unstuck in his throat, but what comes out of his mouth is stupid, obvious, and not the answer Ned is looking for.

“Ben died,” he says.

Ned’s expression falters again.

“It was my fault.”

Saying the words aloud is like reciting a charm. It ends the terrible curse of silence and numbness and stillness which, more than the Arlington’s duplex, has been Peter’s prison these last weeks. But it is not a relieving freedom. It’s like all of the blood is rushing back to a limb that was nearly-dead from lack of circulation, and the all-over prickling of grief and shock and anger arriving all at once sends Peter to his knees.

"It was my fault," he sobs, covering his face with his hands. "It was my fault, Ned. He's dead because of me."

He doesn't even realize that Ned's hand is on his back until the sobs subside, which feels like it takes a long time. When he finally looks up, taking deep, hiccuping breaths, Ned is crouched beside him, and there are tear tracks on his face—not as inflamed as Peter's, but still shining in the waning daylight.

"Come on," he says.

Ned hooks an arm under Peter's and hauls him to his feet. Peter doesn't ask where they're going; just follows, stumbling slightly in his too-tight sneakers and not looking up until they are in a pizza joint and Ned is at the counter, speaking to the cashier.

Ned orders four slices, hands two to Peter, and they sit on the curb outside of the shop, watching floods of late-afternoon commuters pass by. The pizza is terrible, but the saltiness replenishes what was lost in his tears, and Peter hasn't had a meal this large since he moved. Ned even gives him his second slice, and only when he is so full it's uncomfortable does Peter start to talk.

He tells Ned about his late-night trips out of the house. He tells him how Ben came to get him from the arcade that night. How they fought. How his uncle stepped in front of him when the mugger appeared in the alleyway but Peter, nerves frayed from all the shouting, lurched forward almost on instinct, as if he could stop the gun emerging from the man's jacket. How the man had startled, and there was a flash, and then...

Ned swallows as Peter falls silent.

"Your new... your foster parents," he says. "Are they being nice to you?"

Peter laughs bitterly, shakes his head.

"I deserve it though," he says. "If it wasn't for me Ben never would have been out that night. If I hadn't..."

"*Peter.*"

Peter looks up. Ned looks aghast.

"You do not—Peter, that was *so* not your fault. And even if it was, which it wasn't, if they're not being... if they're not treating you right, that isn't cool. It's not okay. You need to tell someone, Peter, you need to—to—"

"Who am I supposed to tell, Ned? My social worker just says things are 'adequate' when she comes. And—and they are adequate, I guess. I mean, they feed me, and I go to school, and—"

"Do they hit you?"

Peter flinches.

"*Peter!*"

"They don't!" Peter tries to backtrack, but Ned already looks scandalized. "It's not—it's not really hitting. It's just... they push me around sometimes, when I'm not... it's not like they actually *hurt* me."

Ned sets his half-eaten pizza on the sidewalk, looking nauseous.

“You have to get out of there, man.”

Peter laughs bitterly. “And go where?”

“Maybe my parents—”

Peter’s raised eyebrow slices through the rest of Ned’s sentence.

“Fine, so not that. But there has to be somewhere. That’s like, against the law. CPS has to find you a good home.”

“I don’t think they *have* to do anything, Ned.”

Ned gets to his feet so abruptly that Peter startles and nearly drops his own plate.

“Peter,” he says, and Peter has never heard Ned’s voice so stern. Almost like an adult’s. “What do you think Ben would say if he knew how they were treating you? Do you think he’d *want* that? No way, man. You were like, the best thing that ever happened to him. He even told you so.”

“That was before I got him killed,” says Peter, sharper than he means to.

But Ned doesn’t back down.

“I knew Ben too,” he says. “And that’s bullshit. He loved you, Peter. Of course he followed you, because that’s what responsible parents are supposed to do. He wouldn’t regret that. But this?” He gestures at Peter, scrawny and pathetic with his broken glasses and increasingly threadbare clothes, face still swollen from crying. “Ben would never, ever want this for you, dude.”

Back in his basement corner that evening, dryer clanking next to his head like it’s full of silverware instead of towels, Peter listens to his uncle’s voice play over and over in his head like scratched vinyl.

“*Are you happy, Peter?*” the phantom Ben says.

Then, *You? You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.*”

Upstairs, a door slams.

“*Not everything has a why. Sometimes things are just hard.*”

Mr. Arlington starts to shout. His words are lost beneath the clamor of the dryer, but he sounds especially virulent tonight. A second later, Mrs. Arlington’s rises to join his.

Ned’s voice joins Ben’s.

“*That’s what responsible parents are supposed to do.*”

Would Ben really hate him? For the last two months it’s seemed like a given, but tonight he isn’t so sure.

A third voice joins the shouting upstairs. It's unintelligible, but it sounds like a woman. The neighbor must have come to yell about the volume on the TV again.

"You don't have to let him push you around, Pete," says Ben, handing Peter an ice pack. Peter presses it to his elbow, bruised from when Flash slammed the locker on him. "Why do you?"

"It's just easier," says Peter, shrugging.

"I know for a fact you told him off for calling Ned names last week. Mrs. Leeds called me."

Peter smirks, even though his elbow is throbbing.

"To tell you what a hero I am?"

"Ah. No. To tell me that if my kid gets hers in a fight ever again she'll have you hauled away to juvie. But I read between the lines." They share a grin. Ben's fades first. "I don't get it, pal. You'll defend Ned but not yourself?"

Peter sighs. "It's just different when it's someone else. It's easier. I don't know why."

Ben's expression goes fierce, like it only does on the rarest occasions.

"You," he says, "are allowed to defend yourself. You're just as important as anyone else, Peter Parker. And don't you forget it."

The memory fades. So do the voices upstairs.

"Responsibility is not a choice."

The door slams again.

The fight is over.

Peter starts checking his email after school.

It takes just a couple of days to work out a system. Ned has some allowance saved, which he uses to buy Peter a bus pass, and Peter starts spending two nights a week riding between Queens and his new school, because the Arlingtons don't care what time he gets home so long as he doesn't ask for dinner when he misses it, whereas Ned's mom would throw a conniption if she knew how her son was spending his Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

Through a small period of trial and error, they discover that Midtown High is the least conspicuous place to meet up. The doors are open for after-school activities, and all the students are so nerdy no one questions the extra pair of dorky teens hanging around, meaning they have free reign over the school's many expensive amenities. He and Ned build Lego sets in the band room, blow things up in the chem lab, and shoot hoops in the gym. Peter even uses the shop tools to solder his broken glasses back together.

Ned sneaks him food, too. Bigger meals than he would get at the duplex. And as long as he's not there, there's nothing for Mrs. Arlington to hit.

Life gets better. Bearable, even.

“I wish I could come here with you next year,” Peter says as they leave the school one evening. “I visited my high school last week. It totally sucks. They don’t even have AP science classes.”

“*Dude*,” Ned groans. “Not even like, AP Bio?”

“I don’t even know if they have *regular* bio.”

“That seems like a human rights violation.”

It’s nearly summer. Normally Peter would be excited for languid afternoons spent playing video games with Ned and trips to Coney Island with Ben, but this year the thought of school ending fills him with dread. He knows he can’t spend all day with Mrs. Arlington, but he doesn’t know where else he’ll go: Ned’s mom has signed him up for four different “preparatory” summer camps, and he’ll be gone almost until the new semester starts.

“Maybe you can talk to Principal Morita,” says Ned. “I met him at one of the decathlon things last year, he seems really cool. Apparently his grandfather was a Howling Commando so he like, practically knows Captain America.”

“You think Captain America can get me into Midtown?”

“I bet he would, actually. He’d be all like, *Science is cool. Without science, where do you think I’d be?*”

They laugh. Even Peter’s school uses the corny Captain America PSAs.

“But for real,” says Ned, as they approach the bus stop, “I bet Morita’d make an exception. You already take the bus here, don’t you? If they’d waive tuition—”

“Which they would do because?”

“Uh, because you were the smartest kid in school. *Dude*. Now that I think about it, they would probably *beg* you to come back. You should ask! Or—or I can ask for you! Orientation is in July and—!”

The bus is here. Peter glances over his shoulder at it, mostly to hide the little flame of hope that has kindled in his chest, his increased heartbeat.

Maybe Ned is right. His grades are still good, and the cousins don’t care what he does as long as it doesn’t cost them any money. He already has the bus pass.

“Yeah,” he says, as the bus doors hiss open. “Yeah, that would be really good, actually.”

“*Yes*. How cool would it be to see each other every day?”

“It would be awesome.” Peter mounts the bus steps. “See you next week?”

“You know it.”

For the first time since Ben died, Peter arrives at the duplex smiling.

It doesn’t last.

“Where the *hell* have you been?”

Peter startles as he closes the door behind him. He expected the cousins to be asleep, like they usually are at this hour, but both are awake, and dressed in their street clothes. Even Mrs. Arlington, whose regular uniform is a tartan bathrobe and house slippers, is wearing a horrible yellow polka-dot dress.

Peter’s heart sinks. There’s only one reason Mrs. Arlington gets dressed up.

“Your social worker just left,” says Mr. Arlington. “Do you have any idea how stupid you made us look?”

“I’m sorry,” says Peter, already shrinking to press his back against the door. “I didn’t know she was coming.”

“Does Mr. Parker frequently stay out past dinner without telling you where he’s gone?” Mrs. Arlington’s rasp sounds nothing like the social worker, but there’s no doubt who she’s impersonating. “That bitch looked at us like we were derelicts. As though we haven’t let you live here on our dime, eating our food, using our things like they’re your own.”

The achy feeling arrives more painfully than it usually does, and Peter’s breath hitches as Mr. Arlington takes a step toward him, nearly closing the space between them.

“You’d almost think,” he says, as Mrs. Arlington steps up behind him, “you aren’t grateful for our hospitality. Are you grateful to be here, Parker?”

It takes Peter too long to realize that he should answer *Yes*. He stares at his cousins, mouth shut, trying to breathe through his nose as the ache in his chest turns tight, and by the time their eyes go wide with fury it’s too late.

They both lurch toward him, but Mrs. Arlington is faster, elbowing Mr. Arlington out of the way and grabbing Peter by the shoulder with a stubby hand that is nevertheless surprisingly strong. She shakes Peter so his head knocks against the door, and he sucks in a wheezing gasp.

Asthma attack, he thinks. He hasn’t had one in over eight months, but he recognizes it like he recognizes his own reflection.

But before he can say anything Mrs. Arlington shakes him again, and this time he hits the door with enough force to make the door shake, his head sparkle with sulfuric pain.

“Do you have any idea what we’ve gone through to have you here, boy?” she hisses. “The bullshit we’ve had to put up with, especially with that *cunt* descending on us—”

“I need my—”

“*Shut up!*”

Peter’s inhaler is in his duffel bag. His duffel bag is in the basement, but Mrs. Arlington’s hand is digging into his shoulder hard enough that Peter’s eyes start to water—or maybe that’s because it’s getting harder to fill his lungs, which are starting to feel like crumpled paper sacks.

“The money! The food! You, skulking around here like some weepy little goblin, like you don’t

care how expensive you are, like you don't care that we're barely compensated for our generosity —"

Beyond his shriveled lungs, something in Peter's chest snaps.

"*Expensive?*" he wheezes. "You barely even feed me, how expensive can I be?"

Mrs. Arlington is so shocked she lets go of him.

Mr. Arlington steps forward. "Listen, boy—"

But before he can do anything, Mrs. Arlington slaps Peter across the face.

Peter's hand leaps to his cheek. His lungs are empty. Mrs. Arlington's eyes bulge, making her look more toad-like than ever. Before he can open his mouth to try, once again, to speak the need for his inhaler, she slaps him again.

"How *dare* you!" she shrieks. Another strike. "How *dare* you! *How dare you!*"

Peter raises his arms to cover his head, choking on a plea, but Mrs. Arlington is beyond reason, and Mr. Arlington, when Peter catches a glimpse of him between blows, looks uncomfortable, but makes no attempt to intervene.

"Stop," Peter gasps. "Stop. Stop!"

He flings his hands out, only meaning to catch her arm as it descends again, but instead his hands meet Mrs. Arlington's fleshy chest, and before he can stop himself, Peter shoves.

Mrs. Arlington stumbles. She rocks back on her heels. For a second her arms windmill through the air almost comically. Then she topples, landing on her ample backside with a soft *flump*.

Everyone stares down at her, wide-eyed and silent, while she stares up at Peter.

She starts to scream.

Peter doesn't hesitate this time. As Mr. Arlington kneels beside his shrieking partner, Peter vaults over them both, running for the basement door, ignoring Mr. Arlington's shouts for him to stop. He pauses just long enough to wedge the doorstop underneath the door from the inside, then practically tumbles down the rickety wooden steps in his haste to overturn his duffel bag and snatch his inhaler out of the detritus that comes tumbling out.

His lungs fill with albuterol first, then air.

Upstairs, the screaming goes on.

The Way Things Are

You were wrong, Uncle Ben.

It's maybe the millionth time he's thought it since he came here, but he can't seem to stop. Like he has mental Tourette's, the thought just bursts out of his brain, five, ten, fifty times a day. While he's scrubbing dishes. While he's bouncing the half-deflated basketball off the back wall with Felipe. While he's clicking aimlessly through homeschool courses in the musty attic, where Ms. Charlise keeps the computer.

He thinks it now, staring at the snapped cross-support on the bunk above his and half-hoping the whole thing will just collapse on top of him.

It probably wouldn't kill him, though.

Springs creak. The support groans, but holds. Felipe's face looms out of the darkness over the side of the top bunk.

"Hey, *ese*," he whispers, "you awake?"

Peter props himself up on his elbows.

"I'm always awake, man. What's up?"

Felipe jerks his head at the other bed. Across the minuscule space of the bedroom, a second set of bunk beds holds just one occupant. Peter gropes for his glasses and sees that said occupant is curled on his side, facing the wall and shaking with silent tears.

He sighs, looks at Felipe. Felipe shrugs.

"You got the golden touch, my man," he says, "I'll just make things worse."

"Yeah, I got it."

Peter gets out of bed. Crouches next to the other one and whispers, "Hey. Hey, new kid. You okay?"

The new kid rolls over, tears shining in the moonlight filtering through the window, which has no curtain. He startles when he sees Peter and tries to press himself against the wall. Peter holds his hands up.

"Woah," he says, "hey, it's okay. I'm not gonna hurt you. I just wanna make sure you're alright. Are you alright, kid?"

Felipe drops to the floor behind Peter. The new kid's wide eyes flicker toward him, reflecting fear, but Peter holds his own gaze steady until the kid meets it and shakes his head.

"I don't know," he whispers.

The new kid arrived after dinner, dropped off by his CPS worker and a cop right as the other boys, Peter included, were getting ready for bed.

Just like Peter was six weeks ago.

“Yeah, that’s how most people feel on their first night. You got a name?”

“Arnold.”

Felipe whistles dubiously, but silences himself at Peter’s glare.

“Hey Arnold, I’m Peter.” Peter offers a hand and Arnold takes it nervously. “This is Felipe. He’s not as much of a dick as he seems.”

“Hey, I take offense at that, Pedro. I’m *hung*.”

“He is disgusting, though.” Peter rolls his eyes and turns back to Arnold. “How old are you?”

“Eleven,” Arnold says, voice so small it’s almost inaudible.

“Yikes.” Felipe crouches next to Peter on the floor. “Eleven years old and practically in the big house? What’d you do to get here, Arnoldo?”

“It’s um, it’s Arnold.”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure it’s Arnoldo.”

“That’s just Felipe, Arnold, ignore him.”

Felipe holds his hands out, innocent.

“Hey,” he says, “if I gotta spend the rest of my life getting called Phillip by gringos, some of your gringos are gonna go by your Spanish names, *comprende*?”

“Believe it or not, that means he likes you.”

Felipe grins at Peter, then looks back at Arnold.

“So, Arnoldo, what’d you do? Knife a guy?”

Arnold shrugs and looks at his hands.

“No need to be modest, my man. You wanna hear how we got slapped with this sentence? See, I’m a victim of an unjust system” —Peter snorts— “but Pedro here? He’s a mad dog. Real crazy. He should probably be in supermax, but he turned those big brown eyes of his on the officer that arrested him and instead they sent him here to put the rest of us in the line of fire, can you believe that?”

Arnold looks at Peter, shrinking back again but at the same time looking doubtfully at Peter’s narrow shoulders, his mussed, too-long hair, and his pallid skin. Peter rolls his eyes again.

“He’s lying, Arnold.”

“I sure as hell *ain’t*,” says Felipe. “Mad Dog Pedro pushed an old lady down some stairs, Arnoldo. Just ‘cuz he fuckin’ felt like it.”

“There were no stairs.”

“That’s what the police report said, though. I keep tellin’ you, my man, you gotta *own* it. Mark your territory. Older kids aren’t gonna fuck with you if they think you kill old ladies for fun.”

“And yet somehow I don’t want that to be my reputation,” says Peter. “If marking territory is so important, why have you never told us what *you* did, Felipe?”

Felipe whistles again, lowly.

“Like I said,” he says. “Victim of the system.”

“Um,” says Arnold.

They both turn to look at him.

“Is the food good here?” he asks. “I’m... they didn’t give me dinner. At the station, I mean. And when I got here...”

Peter glances at Felipe just as his bunkmate’s expression goes dark.

“You stick with us, Arnold,” says Peter, “and you’re gonna be just fine. You should get some sleep, okay?”

Peter gets to his feet. Felipe looks like he’d like to say something else, but Peter shakes his head and Felipe closes his mouth and climbs back into the upper bunk, scowling.

Peter gets back into his own bed. Takes his glasses off. Stares at the broken support.

"You are allowed to defend yourself," says Uncle Ben, his voice as loud as it is silent.

“You were wrong, Uncle Ben,” Peter whispers.

Uncle Ben doesn’t reply.

Now that Arnold is here, there are five boys at the halfway house, including Peter. Justin is tall and black and almost eighteen, and as such he doesn’t talk much—staying out of trouble until his birthday, according to Felipe. Ryan is nearly as silent, though white, and as broad as Justin is tall. But where Justin’s silence is brooding and solitary, Ryan’s seems to be a result of extreme stupidity, and is punctuated only by an occasional random fist, if one is unlucky enough to catch him alone in the hallway, or the living room. The first thing Felipe did when Peter arrived at the house was warn him to stay out of Ryan’s way, so that’s the first thing Peter does for Arnold as they walk down to breakfast the next day.

Sure enough, Ryan scowls as the three of them troupe into the kitchen, and Arnold hurries to take the seat furthest from his at the table. Justin is nowhere to be seen, but Mr. Leonard is there, and Karen is leaning over the stove, and she smiles as the younger boys take their seats.

“Good morning, boys,” says Karen, while Ryan remains silent.

Karen and Mr. Leonard are the Monday-Wednesday-Friday day shifters. Mr. Leonard mostly stands in the corners, staring at his phone, but Peter likes Karen. At nineteen she is almost as short as Peter, black, and a little chubby. Karen wears a constant smile and is the only provider who doesn’t talk to the boys like they’re sewer scum. She’s the one not-horrible part of living in the halfway house, which has been Peter’s home since the Arlingtons surrendered custody.

Even though they decided not to press charges—after the officer in charge of Peter’s case cited the average court fees for a case like Peter’s, interestingly enough—just the accusation of felony assault (which, according to the Arlingtons, was what Peter committed) can’t be expunged from his record until he’s eighteen. The lack of a conviction makes no difference.

There are very few foster families who want to take fourteen-year-olds as it is, but there are even fewer willing to take fourteen-year-olds who have been accused of shoving women down flights of stairs.

So they sent Peter here.

If someone had told him just two months ago that he would miss living with the Arlingtons, Peter would have laughed in their face. But that was before he’d been introduced to halfway-house living.

There are no more excursions to see Ned. There are no more excursions *period*, because the boys aren’t allowed to leave the premises, except for chaperoned “field trips” every other weekend, which usually means that the boys who have outgrown their clothes go to Goodwill with one of the providers. Peter doesn’t even know if Ned knows where he’s gone, because besides the homeschool website, which they visit in turns, the internet is fully blocked on the ancient computer in the attic. And even though they get two supervised phone calls on the house phone each week, Peter never memorized Ned’s number like he did Ben’s. And May’s.

(He called her again, once, his first week here, only to discover that her number had been reassigned. Peter hung up before the old man who acquired it could finish telling him he had the wrong one, then spent the next two weeks biting his knuckles against the shame of having made the same mistake *again*.)

Somehow, the isolation and the boredom and the confinement aren’t the worst parts. The worst part is—

“Is this it?” Ryan grunts as Karen places a plate on the table in front of him.

Loathe though Peter is to agree with Ryan, today’s breakfast is especially pitiful: it consists of a single hard-boiled egg and a half piece of wheat toast, unbuttered.

Karen grimaces.

“Sorry, guys,” she says, sounding genuinely apologetic. “They haven’t adjusted for the new guy yet, it might be slim pickings for a couple of days.”

Peter glances at Arnold, who is clearly trying not to cry as he looks down at his own egg, and then at Felipe, who has an expression to match Peter’s thoughts: this has nothing to do with Arnold.

Peter lowers his head. Pokes at his egg.

He’s done defending himself. What good does it do?

What good has it ever done?

(“Ese,” *Felipe said Peter’s first night, while both of them lay awake with growling stomachs, Peter biting back regret at ever having complained about the meals at the duplex, “that’s just the way things are.”*)

The jangle of keys makes everyone look up: a Pavlovian response. Except instead of food the boys—and Karen, who is sitting at the coffee table, playing go-fish with Peter and Felipe and Arnold while Justin skulks in the ratty armchair in the corner—are greeted by the sight of Ms. Charlise, emerging from her office for the first time today.

They call Ms. Charlise the headmistress, but Peter has yet to work out the logic behind the title. For one, this stuffy brick oven of a house is about as far from a school as it's possible to be. For another—and more importantly—Ms. Charlise doesn't *do* anything, as far as he can tell, except stay in that so-called office, which doubles as her bedroom, shouting muffled curses into her telephone and emerging three times a day to check the locks on the doors, the windows, and, of course, the refrigerator. The only reason he can come up with is that Ms. Charlise is the only staff member who stays on the premise at all times, and that she might possibly own the house—but this last is just a guess, because Ms. Charlise does her best never to speak to them unless she absolutely has to.

She's in full form this morning as she locks the office door behind her. She doesn't even glance at them as she shuffles past them on her way to the kitchen, keys clanging against her hip, where she keeps them looped through her belt. She also doesn't comment on the fact that Mr. Leonard is nowhere to be seen, even though technically there are supposed to be two providers with the boys at all times (he's outside, taking his fourth long smoke break of the morning).

Arnold looks at Peter with a question in his eyes, but Peter just shakes his head. With Ms. Charlise, it's better to accept the silence.

But apparently, Karen does not agree. Just as Ms. Charlise sidles past Justin—who doesn't even glance up from his book—she gets to her feet.

"Ma'am!" she says, and Ms. Charlise turns around slowly, her pouchy, red-rimmed eyes raking Karen's youthful face with unmistakable dislike. "Good morning." It's almost afternoon. "I was wondering if I could speak with you for a moment."

"I have a very busy day coming up."

Ms. Charlise turns toward the door.

"We have a new resident this morning, Ms. Charlise," says Karen.

Peter admires her gall. Ms. Charlise's glare reminds him of Mrs. Arlington, makes his chest contract with phantom tightness every time she is in the room. But Karen holds her ground and doesn't falter, even when Ms. Charlise barely glances at Arnold and then turns her obvious irritation on her employee.

"If there's nothing else."

Once again she turns away.

"Actually"—Karen steps forward—"I'd really like to talk to you about our meals budget. Maybe we could go into your office and—"

"The budget is fixed," says Ms. Charlise, not even bothering to turn around this time. "If you have a problem, take it up with the state."

She takes another step toward the door. Peter's respect for Karen ratchets up another notch when the younger woman, undeterred, sidles around the coffee table to stand between the headmistress and the doorway, forcing Ms. Charlise to look her in the eye.

"Except, ma'am," she says, "except, I've looked at the budget, and I see what we have on-site, and I just can't imagine—"

"That's outside your duties, Ms. Anders."

"Well, yes, but it's public record and—"

Ms. Charlise's eyes jolt away from Karen's face to look at Ryan, who has just appeared in the doorway, a hulking shadow.

Her scowl deepens.

"And where have you been, Mr. Overton?" she snaps. "I thought your case worker agreed that social time is to be a firm aspect of your rehabilitation."

Ryan snarls in reply, making the three younger boys sitting around the coffee table recoil. Ms. Overton doesn't even blink, just pushes Karen out of the way and goes to stand toe-to-toe with her largest, most intimidating resident, even though her head only rises to his chest.

"Do I need to write you up again, Mr. Overton?" she says. "Because if I recall, one more citation could indicate that your parole was granted prematurely. Should I inform your case worker that you enjoy incarceration more than you enjoy following a simple rule?"

"Ms. Charlise, please, it was Ryan's turn on the computer. I told him he could—"

Ms. Charlise sticks a hand into Karen's face to silence her, still glaring up at Ryan.

"Well?" she says.

Ryan's sneer deepens, and there is a collective holding of breath. For a second Peter is certain there is going to be a fight. He scoots closer to Arnold, blocking him from view. Then—

"Sorry, ma'am," Ryan grunts, and he takes a lumbering step to the side, out of Ms. Charlise's way.

Her keys clink as she shoulders past him.

They all listen until she disappears down the hallway, and don't exhale until they hear the front door open and close, then the clunk of the key turning in the lock.

Ryan stands in the hallway, gazing after her with an inscrutable expression until Karen steps forward and puts a hand on his arm.

"Come on, Ryan, we can—"

Ryan jerks her hand off.

Peter starts to rise, then scolds himself. *Keep your head down, Parker.*

"Back off, bitch," Ryan says, and before Karen can say anything to stop him, he disappears up the narrow stairs that lead to the bedrooms on the upper level.

Karen stares after him, her back to the living room, and Peter can tell from the way her shoulders

shake that she is gathering herself. But when she turns back, it's with a smile, which lingers on a struck-looking Arnold the longest.

"I'm really sorry about that, boys," she says.

Justin shrugs and goes back to his book. Peter can't think of anything to say, especially not when he can feel Arnold trembling slightly beside him.

"Ah, fuck them Miss K," says Felipe. "We all know you a homegirl. It isn't your fault this place is a shithole."

Arnold looks even more shocked, but Peter and Karen give identical shaky laughs.

"Language," she says, resuming her seat next to Arnold and placing a hand on his knee so subtly Peter wouldn't see it if he weren't looking for it. "I still work at this shithole, you know."

"Yeah, and we live here. Ain't none of us can *really* talk shit, but all I'm saying is you're *allowed*, Miss K. I can't speak for Pedro and Arnoldo, but I for one am no snitch."

"Uh, seconded," says Peter, picking up his cards. "On the, um, not being a snitch part. Even felons have to have some morals, right?"

They all laugh this time.

It's the one thing that the halfway house has against the Arlingtons: at least here, Peter isn't alone.

That the halfway house is like an oven is no exaggeration. There is no air conditioning. The windows are all locked shut.

Peter has been here since June. He thought the heat couldn't be worse than it was in July, when the boys all had to wear sandals anytime they were on the hardwood floors in the hallways, to avoid scalding their feet.

Then August arrived.

In August, the humidity makes the air so heavy breathing it is like having a continuous asthma attack. Their urine is "fuckin' sludge" (Felipe's words) no matter how much water they drink, because they are all sweating it out faster than they could hope to replenish it. If Peter stands up too quickly, he has to grip whatever wall or furniture is nearest to stave off the inevitable wave of lightheadedness.

None of the boys complain. Even Arnold knows, by the end of his first week, there's nothing to be done.

When Karen is on shift, she does what she can to mitigate the heat. She lets them into the yard, where the air is just slightly lighter than it is indoors, and they all take turns drenching each other with the garden hose and pilfering the little pockets of shade cast by the high, barbed-wire fence and the houses next door. It's just enough to keep them from going insane.

At night, though, there's no escape.

The Friday after Arnold arrives, Peter is lying on top of his covers, unsure if he is half asleep or just torpid from heat and hunger and dehydration. On nights when he can't sleep—which is every night—he recounts the plots of the movies he and Ben used to watch over and over until the words turn into pictures and the pictures to dreams, and in this way he can usually claim a few hours of rest before the wasp-sting of morning sun turns the sodden heat of night into something sharp.

Tonight's tale is *It Came From Outer Space*. After the Chitauri attack his parents had forbidden Peter from watching it, but their reticence had only encouraged Ben. "If we can't watch cinematic masterpieces like this," said Ben, "then those alien bastards have already won." It never failed to make younger Peter laugh.

Tonight, older Peter watches in his mind's eye as the malformed, cycloptic alien lands.

Just as it does, a shadow looms up over his bed.

First, Peter thinks he's entered the hazy twilight that occurs before sleep, where dreams meld with reality.

Then he realizes Ryan is standing over his bed, and he yelps.

Ryan claps a hand over Peter's mouth, but not before his roommates hear. Arnold shoots up like a geyser and knocks his head on the bunk above his; Felipe scrambles out of the top bunk with a "What the *fuck*, man!" and grabs Ryan's arm.

Peter fully expects Ryan to hit him. But as soon as Felipe touches him, Ryan releases Peter, hissing, "Shut the fuck up!"

The three younger boys freeze, staring up at Ryan, waiting. For a minute, he lapses back into his intimidating silence, considering each of them in turn. Then he reaches into his pocket.

Felipe and Peter both start forward, but when Ryan's hand emerges it is not holding a weapon but a silver key, which gleams in the moonlight.

"What's that?" whispers Arnold.

"It's a fucking key, dumbass."

"Yeah, but what's it go to, *pendejo*?" says Felipe.

His tone is irritable, but he looks just like Peter feels: curious.

Ryan narrows his eyes. "Charlise's office."

"No *fucking* way."

Now Felipe can't keep the admiration out of his voice. Even Peter, whose heart is still thumping uncomfortably, leans forward to inspect the key, ignoring his own discomfort as he enters the perimeter of Ryan's reach.

"How'd you get it?" he says, groping for his glasses. Ryan's scowl, apparently a permanent feature, gains clarity.

"Grabbed it when the bitch hip-checked me in the hall."

"And she hasn't noticed it's gone?"

“She keeps doubles of all of them. This is just the spare.”

In spite of himself, Peter starts to feel impressed too. Ryan’s fingers must be far more nimble than their thickness would suggest. He wonders if that’s why Ryan is in here.

Felipe sits on the bed next to Peter, who has known his bunk-mate long enough now to know when he is affecting casualness. Felipe’s shoulders might be slumped, but his fingertips drum on the bedspread, sending vibrations up and down Peter’s spine.

“So what?” says Felipe. “You come here to shank us with it? Because I gotta say, my man, when they say size doesn’t count they’re actually referring to—”

“Justin,” says Ryan, “is a fucking pussy.”

“What, he didn’t follow through when you dared him to kiss you?”

Ryan does punch Felipe now, gives him a charlie horse on the upper arm that’s not enough to leave a bruise but is enough to make Felipe yelp.

Peter gets to his feet, stands between Felipe and Ryan.

“Get to the point then, sea-monster,” he says. “Not all of us are goons who don’t need sleep.”

Peter is immediately surprised by his own audacity. In the swarm of adrenaline, the mouthiness he thought he’d lost the night Ben died rises up before he can stop it.

He braces himself for a charlie horse of his own, but Ryan doesn’t hit him.

“I need your help,” he says.

“What?”

“Help, dickless. Help.” He shakes the key in Peter’s face. “Justin said no, so I need one of you twerps. And I’ve heard Karen talk about you. She says you’re smart.”

Peter glances sidelong at Felipe just in time to see him look at his lap. Peter knows Felipe has a crush on Karen, but Peter doesn’t mention it; just swallows and looks back at Ryan.

“What kind of help?”

“Charlise lies about the food.”

Peter’s boldness transmutes to queasiness in an instant.

“I mean, probably, but—”

“Not probably. She’s got a second fridge in her office. I was in there two weeks ago getting written up and I saw it. She left it open and everything. It’s full-sized, and it’s fucking loaded. She says we got no money in the budget, but she has enough food in that goddamn room of hers to feed the Upper East Side, and she’s fucking hoarding it.”

There is a moment of sharp silence. Even Arnold scoots closer now, his eyes shining with something Peter hasn’t seen in them since he arrived: hope.

“Are you fuckin’ serious?” says Felipe.

Ryan nods.

"I'm gonna get in," he says. "On Monday, when she does her errands. But I can't do it by myself. I need someone to distract the providers, and keep lookout." He nods at Peter, pocketing the key. "So. You in?"

For a second, all of Peter's mind is occupied by the thought of a full fridge. Soda, cookies, sandwiches—hell, at this point he would probably sell his own clothes for a fresh salad. He's grown so accustomed to the constant, gnawing hunger he almost can't remember what it's like to feel fully sated. And if Ms. Charlise really is dipping into their budget to buy food for herself—

You're allowed to defend yourself Peter.

The image sloughs away.

"No," says Peter.

Felipe and Arnold's faces go slack, while Ryan's immediately assumes an expression of fury.

"Pedro, what the hell?" says Felipe. "You can't be serious, man."

But Peter sets his jaw, widens his stance, and meets Ryan's eye.

"If we get caught, we all get stuck here even longer," he says. "Ms. Charlise even said it, if Ryan gets written up again he gets a longer sentence. Maybe they even send us to actual jail."

"Peter," says Felipe, gaping. It's the first time he's used Peter's real name. "It's food, *ese*, it's not like we're robbing the goddamn Queen of England. How can you not want *food*? You're the skinniest fuckin' kid here!"

Meeting Felipe's eye is harder than meeting Ryan's, but Peter forces himself to nonetheless.

"Trust me," he says, "it's only going to make things worse. It always does. You stand up for yourself" —

(Peter, lunging toward the gun right as Ben steps in front of him, pushes him back)

(Peter, hands thrown out to stop a descending blow, his lungs empty)

(Peter, handcuffed and alone, head hanging as his social worker appears to tell him he's no longer wanted)

— "and things get worse. They always get worse."

He looks at Ryan.

"I'm out."

Ryan opens his mouth and Peter forces himself not to flinch, certain he's about to get his ass kicked. But before Ryan can respond, Felipe cuts in.

"I'll do it."

Peter's stomach sinks, but when he turns to Felipe, his bunk-mate's eyes are hard and unyielding, and looking not at Peter but at Ryan.

“Fuck the haters,” Felipe says, “just tell me what to do.”

Hunger

On Saturday, after a night spent sleeplessly wondering what life at the halfway house will look like without Felipe, Peter corners him in the bathroom.

“Don’t do it,” he says. “You were the one who told me what an idiot Ryan is, you know he’s definitely gonna get caught. Don’t go down with him, Felipe, you’re better than that.”

Felipe spits his toothpaste out, rinses his mouth, and rounds on Peter with more coldness in his expression than Peter could have imagined from his bright-eyed, foul-mouthed friend.

“What the fuck would you know about how good I am, *ese*?” What was once an endearment now sounds like a taunt. “I knew you weren’t a badass, Parker, but I never pegged you for a pussy.”

And he shoulders past him.

For the next two days, Peter rediscovers what it’s like to be alone. He thought familiarity would have taken the sharp edge off, but it turns out the brief foray into camaraderie makes returning to solitude a dozen times more painful. Felipe’s glares over the breakfast table and during social time make his stomach twist almost as badly as the persistent emptiness which Ryan is hoping to rectify with his plan.

As for Ryan—he delivers the punch Peter was expecting the night before in the hallway Saturday afternoon, while the providers are distracted making dinner. Drives his fist into Peter’s diaphragm, then grabs Peter by the collar before he can double over, forcing him to look up with streaming eyes.

“You tell anyone,” he says, “and you’re fucking dead.”

He drops him. Peter falls to his hands and knees, gagging as he tries to suck in a breath while his lungs spasm.

Ryan walks away.

“Who am I gonna tell?” Peter groans when he gets his breath back.

Just as he expected, no one replies.

Monday arrives like its predecessors: swelteringly hot, and, for Peter, with a nervousness that is almost as cloying as his sweat-soaked t-shirts. He spends the morning watching Felipe out of the corner of his eye, but Felipe is carefully expressionless, nearly silent while he eats the breakfast Karen prepares for them—half a cup of oatmeal, made with just boiled water—and reads in the ratty armchair while Peter and Arnold play cards during social time.

Around eleven, Ms. Charlise emerges from her office. Crosses the living room without acknowledging any of them, keys clanging. Heads out the front door.

A car door slams in the driveway, followed by a screech as the car pulls away.

Peter sees Felipe glance at Ryan. He sees Ryan nod.

Peter swallows and looks down at his cards.

Peter was half-hoping Arnold might say something to Karen, to whom he has latched like a barnacle. But he also knows Ryan and Felipe promised to let Arnold in on the goods if he kept his mouth shut.

It seems like food is more important to Arnold than the pockets of affection he receives from Karen, because it is with a cheerful smile that the latter walks into the living room alongside Mr. Leonard around noon and announces,

“Yard time, kiddos. It’s way too hot in here.”

All five boys follow her into the back yard. Peter catches Felipe’s eye as they crowd through the narrow hallway, trailing after the two providers.

Please, he mouths.

Felipe looks away.

They crowd into the tiny yard. Karen starts the hose, lets it run to get rid of the water that has been boiling in the coils all morning.

When Mr. Leonard disappears around the corner in a trail of cigarette smoke, Ryan disappears too.

Felipe waits until Arnold approaches Karen for his turn with the hose to make his exit, slipping through the back door into the house before Peter can think of anything to say to try and stop him. He thinks Justin notices, too, but Justin just retreats to a corner of the yard and buries his face in the worn-out copy of *Great Expectations* he’s been reading ever since Peter arrived.

Peter feels sick. *Please don’t let them get caught*, he thinks, watching the screen door. *Please don’t take Felipe away too*.

It occurs to him that Felipe might already be gone. At least as far as Peter is concerned.

He looks at Karen, thinking maybe he should break his own rule, that he should snitch. Because even if they don’t get caught, Ms. Charlise is sure to notice if her food goes missing, isn’t she?

He can’t catch Karen’s eye. From the way Arnold keeps jabbering, keeping Karen’s eyes on him, Peter thinks he is probably more in on this plan than he’d guessed.

There is a crunch of gravel on the driveway.

Peter’s head whips around so fast the muscles in his neck twang. He knows, even without being able to see, that the car that just pulled up belongs to Ms. Charlise.

She’s back. She must have forgotten something, or—or—

He looks to the back door, a string of unintelligible prayers tumbling through his head, but the back door doesn’t open. Ryan and Felipe didn’t hear the car.

Peter hears the car door open, then shut. Around the front of the house, an atonal interlude of car keys knocking against one another.

“Shit,” Peter whispers. “Shit, shit.”

He runs inside.

Unlike Felipe and Ryan, Peter doesn't have time to be stealthy. He hears the screen door slam behind him, hears Karen call his name, but there's no time to stop and explain, because at the end of the main hallway he can see the front door, see the knob turning—

As the door opens, Peter turns into the living area. At the opposite end of the room, the door to Ms. Charlise's office is open, but there is no sign of Felipe or Ryan. Peter runs, whacking his shin against the coffee table hard enough his eyes water but ignoring the pain, stopping only when he's in the doorway.

In a burst, he takes the office in: an unmade bed; a cluttered desk; framed pictures; lace on everything. And, in the corner, Felipe and Ryan, crouched in front of a full-size fridge, yanking on the chain locked around its handle.

"You didn't even *think* she might have another lock on here, did you, *pendejo*?" Felipe is hissing, but he looks up when he hears Peter at the door, his mouth dropping open.

"Pedro," he says, "what're you—"

"She's coming," Peter pants, "she's—"

A hand lands on his shoulder. Peter gasps, whirls around—

Ms. Charlise is standing right behind him.

The thin layer of sweat that constantly covers Peter's body goes cold. Ms. Charlise's expression is almost unreadable: the only change from her usual jowly stare is that her red-rimmed eyes are slightly narrowed.

She digs her fingers into Peter's shoulder, reminding him so forcefully of Mrs. Arlington he has to remind himself to take a breath. He expects her to slap him. But Ms. Charlise just pushes him behind her, into the living room, and takes a step into her office.

Felipe remains slumped on the floor, mouth hanging slightly open, all the color gone from his face, but Ryan gets slowly to his feet, his expression hard.

"Mr. Overton," says Ms. Charlise, her voice as flat as it always is, "why am I not surprised?"

Ryan spits at her feet.

Finally, Felipe looks at Peter. His face is a reflection of the nausea Peter feels, the horror. Ms. Charlise's expressionless is somehow worse than outright anger; it fills Peter with the same dread he felt waiting in the Arlington's basement the night he got arrested, knowing something terrible was coming but knowing what it was.

Slowly, like a cat prowling after an injured bird, Ms. Charlise steps over to her desk. Felipe, Ryan, and Peter follow her with their eyes, none of them moving.

Ms. Charlise picks up the phone, presses a number on the speed dial.

There is a terrible, deadly silence while she holds the receiver to her ear.

"Yes," she says, "This is Charlise Benning at number nine-oh-seven. Three of our boys have just attempted a theft, in direct violation of their parole."

Felipe leaps to his feet.

“Ms. Charlise, no, please—”

Ms. Charlise holds up a hand, and Felipe falls silent.

“I’ll need at least three officers, and probably a van. No. I’ll contact their parole officers directly. Yes. Thank you.”

She drops the phone into the cradle. To Peter, it sounds like a gavel.

“Ms. Charlise,” Felipe says, “please, I’m sorry. Please, I only got another month, please don’t do this, I can’t go back.”

Peter has never seen his bunkmate cry. The sound of Felipe’s voice cracking makes his own throat constrict painfully, but he doesn’t know what to do. He’s rooted to his spot on the sticky shag rug, his own mouth hanging open uselessly.

In the distance, he hears sirens.

Ms. Charlise tilts her head and looks away from Felipe without acknowledging his tears, toward Ryan.

“And how long did *you* have before your parole officer declared you fit to go home?” she says. “Three weeks, wasn’t it? And yet here we are.”

She steps closer to him, and Peter has a wild urge to warn her off: Ryan is looking at her with an expression that reminds Peter of nothing so much as a coiled snake. He says nothing, though, and Ms. Charlise goes on.

“Tell me, Mr. Overton: was it worth it?”

This is when Peter realizes: Felipe and Ryan are at the halfway house because they are transitioning from juvenile detention centers. A theft like this will be a mark against them, could mean more jail time. But Peter isn’t on parole. He’s only here because he isn’t wanted anywhere else.

He steps forward.

“Ms. Charlise—”

“It was my fault.”

Everybody looks around.

Karen is standing in the entrance to the living room, shining with sweat but straight-backed, her expression set, determined. She is looking not at Peter but at Ms. Charlise, who turns slowly away from Ryan to face her.

Karen steps forward, puts a hand on Peter’s shoulder. Unlike the other hands that have touched him there in the months since Ben died, hers is firm but gentle, and she only squeezes once, reassuringly, as she pushes him behind her.

The sirens are getting closer.

“What was that, Miss Anders?” says Ms. Charlise.

"I told them to do it," says Karen. "I told them about the fridge. I let them out of the yard. Don't punish them, Miss Charlise, it was my fault."

"Miss K, you can't—!"

"Be quiet, Felipe," says Karen sharply. "It's very noble of you to try and protect me, but this is on me, do you understand me?"

Ryan is looking at Karen like he's never seen her before. Felipe is crying freely now but trying to rein himself in. Peter thinks he's probably the only one close enough to see that Karen is shaking.

Ms. Charlise narrows her eyes.

"That's a very serious offense, Ms. Anders."

"Yes, ma'am," says Karen. "But to be fair, I did try to talk to you about the food."

For the first time, a flash of anger crosses Ms. Charlise's face.

"You realize you'll be fired for this."

"No!" say Felipe and Peter at the same time.

Karen holds up a hand.

"Of course. I'm taking full responsibility."

There is a beat. Then—

"You *fucking* bitch."

Before any of them recognize what's happening, Ryan lunges at Ms. Charlise.

Karen screams. Peter and Felipe both cry out, but by the time Peter rushes forward, Ryan has Ms. Charlise on the ground, his legs straddling her hips. Her arms fly up, trying to protect her face as Ryan rains down one punch, then two.

Peter shoves past Karen, who is screaming for Ryan to stop and grabs Ryan by the arm as he raises it for another blow, but he only manages to slow him down; Ryan flings Peter away as though he's made of straw and Peter falls back, his head jarring against the metal bed frame hard enough that his vision whites out for a second, his glasses falling off his nose. By the time his sight comes winking back Felipe has wrapped himself around Ryan's neck, but he has as much success as Peter did: Ryan just shoves him aside, sending him sprawling beside the locked fridge.

Ryan cocks his fist back again and Ms. Charlise, wild-eyed, throws her hands over her face in a last pitiful attempt at self-defense.

But instead of the sound of a clenched fist on flesh, there is a crackle of electricity, followed by a choked-off scream as Ryan goes rigid and falls sideways off of his target.

Everyone looks up.

Mr. Leonard is standing over all of them, a taser clutched in one hand, a nearly-spent cigarette still clenched between his teeth.

Outside, the wailing sirens reach a crescendo. There is a sound of tires on gravel once more.

The police are here.

The police question everyone. But in the end they only take Ryan, though one officer stays behind to escort Karen off the premises.

It's okay, she mouths at Peter and Felipe as they watch her go. And then she smiles.

Peter tries to return it, but isn't sure he pulls it off. Beside him, Felipe is stone-faced, even though tears pour continuously down his cheeks as the door slams over her.

In the dark, Peter watches Arnold's back until it stops quaking with silent tears and his breathing evens into the rhythm of sleep. It's well past midnight when this happens, so Peter assumes Felipe is asleep as well until his bunkmate drops quietly onto the ground beside him.

Felipe sits at the end of Peter's bunk.

Peter sits up. Felipe's face is swollen from crying, but there are no longer tears coming from his eyes, which regard Peter in the pale moonlight with a hardness Peter can't interpret. It's not the dislike Felipe has been radiating for the past two days, but it's nowhere near the companionability they used to share.

When the silence has dragged beyond what Peter can stand, he says, "Felipe, I—"

"I ever tell you why I'm here, Pedro?"

Felipe's voice is soft—too low to wake Arnold—but Peter still closes his mouth immediately. It's rhetorical, this question: Felipe knows he's never told. But Peter still shakes his head.

The moonlight turns Felipe's eyes into shining pools of tepid white as he regards Peter.

"My mom," he says, "is a really good mom. When we were little, you know, she used to work three jobs. She could've worked two and we woulda been okay, you know, paying the rent and all that—but she took that third job because she wanted us to have more than just a roof. She worked all the time, yeah, but whenever she wasn't working she was hanging out with us—me and my little sister—cooking for us, taking us to the movies, helping with homework. Just doing mom shit."

"Felipe—"

"I'm telling you," says Felipe, "because I want you to know that—that my mom is a good mom. She is. Just... not when Uncle José is around."

"José isn't my real uncle. That's just what he made us call him after he started dating my mom. Even when I was just some twelve-year-old little kid I knew this guy was an asshole. He was always making my mom feel bad about herself and shit, like yelling at her for the dumbest stuff. Like, she would load the dishwasher a way he didn't like and he'd chew her out for it. Just fuckin' scream at her. Who gives a that much of a shit about a dishwasher, you know?"

Felipe pauses. His eyes flicker away just a bit, so he's looking into the distance rather than at Peter's face, and the moonlight drains out of them.

"But my mom, she was lonely. She was raising two kids by herself, and when José wasn't screaming at her he'd bring her presents, make her feel special. So she kept him around. And José, he was a smart guy—he knew my mom would eventually catch wise, realize she could do better. So besides the gifts and stuff, he also got her into some bad shit. You know, drugs. Stuff you try once and then can't say no to, 'cuz you need it even while it's killing you. So then my mom had two drugs: she had José and she had smack."

"Felipe, I'm so—"

"Simmer down, white boy. You got shit of your own, and I'm not looking for pity."

Peter sits back. Felipe twists the sheets between his hands.

"I told you I got a sister, right?"

Peter nods.

"Mariña. She's eight now, but back when José was first coming around she was only six. But like a really smart fuckin' six year old. Smart as you are, Pedro, doing math and reading and all that even though she was only in kindergarten. But when my mom started—when she stopped being such a good mom, Mariña took it really hard. She stopped sleeping good, started sucking her thumb again even though she hadn't done that since she was two... and she started wetting the bed."

He glares at Peter, as though he expects him to say something cruel. But Peter just stares at him until he continues.

"At first it wasn't a big deal. I'd just change her sheets, right? But after a few times of that happening we ran out of clean ones. At that point my mom had stopped doing laundry, and José sure as shit wasn't going to help. So we had to keep these piss-stained sheets, 'cuz it was too cold to just sleep without them, and I couldn't wash them by hand because our water kept getting turned off.

"This goes on for a little while. And one day Mariña, she comes home crying. She tells me the other kids are making fun of her at school, calling her 'piss-head' and shit like that—because of the smell. She says she doesn't want to go back.

"Now, I put up with a lot of shit, Pedro, but I wasn't gonna let a bunch of little punks make my smart-ass sister hate school. I wasn't gonna let them ruin that for her. So first I try to talk to my mom and José, but they're both passed out—whatever. So I go into José's wallet. He doesn't got much, but he's got a few bucks, so I take them and I put them in my pocket and I grab my sister's fuckin' pee-stained princess sheets and I say, 'Mariña, stay here. I'll be right back.' And I go to the laundromat.

"At first it's all fine. They got a change machine, so I get a bunch of quarters. But as I'm dropping 'em into the slot I realize: I don't got any detergent. So I go to the front desk. They don't got any, they say, but I can try the convenience store across the street. I go over there, but the fuckin' detergent is ten bucks, and I only got about three in quarters."

Peter is starting to feel sick, and not just because Ms. Charlise sent them to bed without dinner. He holds his breath, forcing himself to keep looking at Felipe as Felipe twists the sheets in his hands harder, almost tearing.

"I stuffed it under my jacket, Pedro. It was so obvious, man, I can't believe they let me get as far as I did. But what do I know about stealing shit? I just wanted to wash some fuckin' princess sheets."

Now Felipe is crying again. It doesn't enter his voice, but fat tears drip down his nose, staining Peter's bedspread.

"State gave me a lawyer. She thought I'd get off easy, because it was my first offense and I was pretty young, but the judge—this old white dude—he took one look at me and said, 'You mark my word, son, you'll be back here in two weeks if I don't set you straight right now.' And he gave me three months." He looks up. "You ever been to juvie, Pedro?"

Peter shakes his head again.

"Avoid it, if you can."

Felipe falls silent, stops crying. He stays silent for so long Peter thinks he's done, but just as he's about to ask, Felipe starts up again.

"When I got home," he says, "Mariña was gone. I guess my abuela figured out what was going on, came to get her while I was locked up. But she didn't have room for both of us, so I was stuck. It was bad enough when I had my sister, but when she was gone it was" —he swallows— "it was real bad. My mom and José had both gotten worse, and all they did was fight and take smack and pass out and then fight some more. I tried to stay away during the day, but I needed somewhere to sleep at night. And that's when they would really go at it."

Felipe takes a deep, steadying breath, as though he has to steel himself for this next part more than what preceded, though Peter can't imagine that what comes next can possibly be more horrible than what's already been said.

"One night I came home and they were sleeping on the couch—unconscious. But this time, they'd left their stash on the coffee table. And I—I don't know what I was thinking. I guess I thought if my mom could get off the drugs she'd go back to being the mom she used to be, or maybe that I could get José to leave if I pissed him off enough... so I took it, and I left.

"I didn't have a plan, Pedro. I thought maybe I'd go to the river and throw it in, I don't know—I guess I really wasn't thinking at all, because what it came down to was me, this real hispanic-lookin' kid with my hood pulled up, walking alone at night with a bag full of heroin. The cop who arrested me laughed right in my face when I told him it wasn't mine. And when I went to court the second time... it was the same judge. The same judge, and he just looks at me and he says, 'How come you people never prove me wrong, huh?'"

Peter is crying now. He knows he shouldn't be. It's not his place, and he wipes his face furiously with the back of his sleeve when Felipe frowns at him.

"On Friday," he says, "you said 'things always get worse when you stand up for yourself.'"

"Felipe, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean you deserved any of this, I only thought—"

"Nah, Pedro. You got me wrong. I'm not trying to say you jinxed us or whatever. And I'm not saying you're wrong that things get shittier the harder you try. I'm saying things are shit *no matter what you do*. You don't get good things for acting good, and bad shit doesn't happen because you made the world angry. Bad shit just *happens*, and you can't help it, and I can't help it. That's just the way things are. But Pedro?"

"...yeah?"

“I saw you about to take the fall for us before Miss K did down there. And I’m telling you, that was a dumb fucking thing to do. You might get a shit sandwich no matter what you put in the kitchen, but it’s your choice whether or not you eat it. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that the only way to not eat it is to look out for your fuckin’ self. You jump in front of a bullet, man, and the only thing that happens is you get shot.”

Felipe stands abruptly. Before Peter can think of anything to say to stop him, he clambers up the ladder and disappears into the upper bunk.

The broken support beam groans.

Felipe doesn’t look at Peter as they head down to breakfast the next morning. Peter doesn’t try to catch his eye this time, just shuffles to his seat with his head down, his stomach twisting.

To everyone’s surprise, Ms. Charlise is standing by the stove. Mr. Leonard is there too, even though he’s not supposed to be on shift. He’s got an unlit cigarette between his lips, and he grins as Arnold, Peter, and Felipe sit with Justin, who is already there.

Peter feels a twinge of sympathy when Ms. Charlise turns to look at them. She has a black eye, and her bottom lip is so swollen she looks like she’s been stung by a massive insect.

His sympathy doesn’t last long.

“It’s come to my attention,” says Ms. Charlise, “that it may be time for me to take more of an interest in your rehabilitation. There’s been a stunning lack of discipline in this house. A lack of structure. It ends today.”

She grabs two plates of scrambled eggs from the counter. She places the first one in front of Arnold, the second in front of Justin.

And she walks out of the room.

Now Peter and Felipe look at each other. They look at Arnold, who is staring between them with an expression like fear. They look at Justin, who is already eating his eggs, his head down.

They look at Mr. Leonard, who continues to grin.

And so Peter and Felipe learn what their punishment is going to be.

There is no more yard time. No more card games. There is heat and sweat and taking long gulps of water from the tap in the bathroom, because Ms. Charlise will only let them fill their water bottles three times a day. They have their phone privileges suspended too, which matters more to Felipe, because Peter doesn’t have anyone to call anyway.

There are no more meals.

This, Peter does care about.

She gives them each a glass of milk and half an apple at bedtime, which is the only indication she doesn't intend to kill them with this punishment. It does nothing to stave off the twist in Peter's gut as he lays awake that night, listening to Felipe toss and turn above him and trying to remember what it was like when hunger was just something he complained about if his parents took too long with dinner, or if he went too long between meals because he was caught up in a project, or reading. It feels as faraway and fake as the sci-fi stories he tells himself to get to sleep.

Tonight, the stories don't work.

By the second day, Peter learns what *hunger pains* really means. The twist takes on a knife-edge, making him feel like his stomach is full of blades. It's so bad he spends the day curled on the couch, only getting up when his need for water outweighs the pain, determinedly avoiding looking at Ms. Charlise.

She wants them to beg.

Peter isn't going to. Because stronger than the hunger, now, is the anger.

He's angry at Ms. Charlise for treating them like this. He's angry at Ben for leaving him here, for making him think life was ever supposed to be fair. He's angry for what's been done to Felipe, and angry because he desperately wants to find a way to prove him wrong—to prove that good things come to good people, and that you can fight back when things go bad... but he can't think of anything to make his argument.

He won't beg, though. That much he can still control.

Lying awake on the second night. No more monster movies. Peter is only half conscious, and stories are too difficult for his hazy brain to formulate.

Instead, he imagines the Avengers.

It's just one scene, played over and over, but with different players each time: Captain America arrives in a hailstorm of splintered wood, gathers the kids, and leaves without a backward glance. Then it is Black Widow. Iron Man. Even the Hulk makes an appearance.

Peter gets so lost in it he doesn't notice that there are sounds coming from above him until the muffled whimpers turn into sobs.

Peter gets up. Sways. Climbs the ladder to the upper bunk with more effort than he's ever spent on anything in his entire life.

Felipe is curled up, arms wrapped around his stomach but still thrashing, rolling on the bed while he tries and fails to find a comfortable position. The sounds he's making remind Peter of the time

he saw a dog get hit by a car. That time, Ben had yanked him away while other samaritans rushed to help, covering Peter's ears and walking briskly until they were out of earshot.

There's no one to yank him away this time.

Peter grabs Felipe's hand.

"Felipe. It's okay. It's gonna be okay."

"It's not," Felipe moans. "She can't do this. She can't do this, she gotta feed us, man. She—she can't just—she can't—"

The rest of the sentence is lost to another moan.

Peter wants to prove Felipe wrong. But he doesn't know how. So instead he sits there, sweaty hands grasping Felipe's, knife twisting, and waits for exhaustion to outweigh hunger.

Peter is sure she will give them breakfast the next day. If she really doesn't want to kill them, she has to—and she doesn't want to kill them. She can't. She'd never get away with it.

Right?

But once again Ms. Charlise has just two plates when they arrive in the kitchen. She gives them to Justin and Arnold and, just like the last two mornings, looks at Peter and Felipe as if daring them to challenge her before she walks out.

Felipe gets to his feet. Staggers over to the counter, where the cookware is soaking in the sink.

"Get back to your seat," says Mr. Leonard, starting forward.

"Fuck off, I'm getting a drink."

Felipe turns the sink on and ducks his head under it, manages just one gulp before Mr. Leonard grabs him by the shoulder and shoves him back.

Felipe wipes his mouth on the back of his wrist, glares up at Mr. Leonard, and then stalks back to the table.

Peter thinks he is probably the only one who sees Felipe slip something into his back pocket as he sits. But when he tries to get a closer look, Felipe turns away from him.

Peter doesn't ask. He doesn't have the energy.

Late afternoon. Peter is on the couch again, Felipe on the floor under the coffee table. In the corner, Arnold is curled in an armchair, while Justin, for all his staring at it, does not appear to have made any progress on his book.

It's Wednesday. They haven't found a replacement for Karen yet, so there's just Mr. Leonard in the house, and around four he ducks out for a smoke break. The boys are so accustomed to his absence by now they don't so much as glance up as he leaves.

After a minute, they hear the sound of the front door opening, the jangle of keys as Ms. Charlise returns from her afternoon errands.

Quietly, without expression, Felipe rolls out from under the table and gets to his feet.

Peter raises his head just in time to see Felipe pull a knife out of his back pocket.

In a great rush, hunger and exhaustion and hyperthermia are washed away by pure horror.

Peter leaps to his feet.

He immediately swoons, vision graying, but he shakes it away, forces himself to stay upright. He lunges, grabbing Felipe's arm before he can make it to the hallway and yanking him back.

"Felipe, *no!*" he hisses.

Felipe tries to fling Peter off, but Peter clings, grip made tight by desperation.

"Get the *fuck* off of me, Peter."

Behind them, Peter hears Arnold scurry into the corner near Ms. Charlise's office. He shakes his head, frantic.

"Please, Felipe. Don't do it, please, you can't. They'll send you away forever, you *can't*."

The jangle is getting closer.

"You think it fucking *matters*?" Felipe snarls. His eyes are sunken, red-rimmed, wild. "You think it matters where I go? I'm done for, Pedro. I was done for the second I stole that fuckin' soap. But she can't get away with this. She can't get away with it, you hear me? Now *let me go*."

But Peter doesn't. He grips harder and throws his weight back, trying to bring Felipe down. But he's too small, and Felipe is too determined: instead of falling over, Felipe yanks his arm out of Peter's grip.

The knife slices through Peter's palm as he goes down. He lands on his back—sees the blood but doesn't feel the pain, not yet. Adrenaline pushes him back to his feet.

Right as Felipe steps into the hallway, Peter tackles him.

Both boys go sprawling into the hallway.

The knife flies out of Felipe's hand. Skitters across the hardwood. Stops right at a pair of feet in ratty, ancient tennis shoes.

Peter and Felipe's brief struggle ends as abruptly as it began when Ms. Charlise picks up the knife. She clenches it, her knuckles white around the handle, as she looks down at them.

"So," she says.

The boys scramble to their feet. Only when Peter sees that his hand is dripping blood all over the floor does the pain arrive. Felipe sees it, too. But he can't say anything, because he's breathing too

hard.

Peter shakes his head at Felipe, clenches his fist against the blood and his jaw against the pain and forces himself to meet Ms. Charlise's blackened, swollen eye.

"What is it," says Ms. Charlise, "that makes boys like you *incapable* of learning? What is the point of rehabilitation when you violent little imbeciles just continue to be violent little imbeciles no matter what we do?"

"How come you people never prove me wrong?"

Peter's vision goes red. How dare she speak to Felipe like that? How dare she, if she has even an *inkling* of what he's been through? Of what *she* has put him through?

The plan forms in an instant.

Uncle Ben was wrong about Peter defending himself. But Felipe was wrong too.

"It's my knife," he says.

"Pedro—!"

Peter holds his bloody fist out, showing it to Ms. Charlise, silencing Felipe.

Peter can't defend himself. He can't help himself. That much is clear. But maybe—just maybe—he can help someone else.

"It's my knife," he says again. "Felipe was trying to take it off me. If you want to punish someone, punish me."

Jumping in front of the bullet might get Peter shot—but if it saves Felipe, then that's exactly what he's going to do.

Hope

The dry meatloaf and limp steamed vegetables they give him in the ER that evening are the best thing Peter has ever tasted. He eats them clumsily with his left hand, because his right—the cut held shut by five neat-but-gruesome black stitches—has swollen slightly, just enough to prevent him from holding a fork.

He knows he should be scared.

He's certainly on edge: every time he hears footsteps outside the curtain that blocks the rest of the emergency room from view he snaps his head up, expecting to see the cop who dropped him off here hours ago, back with handcuffs held aloft, ready to take him away for good.

But Peter doesn't feel scared. He feels sick with worry for what Ms. Charlise is doing to the boys at the halfway house, and guilty, because his stomach is finally full and who knows if Felipe can say the same.

But mostly he feels elated. He looks at his swollen hand, still stained reddish brown with iodine, and he feels proud, for the first time in he can't remember how long.

Felipe isn't going to jail, he thinks. In a few weeks they'll let him out. Maybe he'll get to see his sister.

It's not much. It's so much less than he wants to do. But it's something. It's a chance Felipe might not have had otherwise.

Peter did that.

There are footsteps in the hall. Peter looks up, but when the curtain slides open it is not a police officer standing in front of him but his social worker, her hair piled in a flyaway bun on top of her head and looking, as always, like she is millimeters away from bursting into tears.

Behind her is a man. For a second Peter thinks *he* might be a police officer based solely on his build: he's more than six feet tall and almost too muscular, even though he's graying slightly and has small wrinkles around his eyes, denoting his advancing—though not yet advanced—age. But he's not dressed like a cop. He's wearing jeans and a polo shirt that's a little too small for him, so it's stretched across his broad chest.

He smiles at Peter as he steps into Peter's curtained-off portion of the ER behind the social worker. Peter, surprised, smiles back automatically, then quickly drops it.

"You," says the social worker, drawing Peter's attention, "are one lucky young man, Mr. Parker."

Peter can think of nothing to say to this.

"By some miracle," she goes on, undeterred by Peter's silence, "Charlise Benning has determined to deal with this fiasco internally. Apparently there are conflicting stories about what happened. A mister" —she checks something on the clipboard she has every time Peter sees her— "Felipe Cerna insists that the whole thing was a misunderstanding, though he hasn't clarified what sort, and that any violence was incidental." She nods at Peter's cut. "Ms. Benning disagrees strongly, but because you weren't being *held* at the house, at least not officially..."

The social worker sighs, flips her notes shut.

“The long and short of it, Mr. Parker, is that you aren’t being placed under arrest tonight.”

Peter goggles at her.

“I’m not going to jail?” he says blankly.

The social worker shrugs. “Like I said, you are one lucky young man. I wish I could say the same for *me*, seeing as I’m the one who has to figure out what to do with you now—needless to say, Ms. Benning isn’t keen on taking you back—”

Peter’s mouth drops open. They can’t possibly send him back to the halfway house.

“—but it seems like luck is on my side as well, for once. One of our longest-standing foster parents has just seen his most recent project off to college, and so he has an opening. He’s very kindly agreed to take you.”

Peter bristles at the word *project*. It reminds him of Felipe’s judge, calling him *you people*. But when he looks at the tall man, he is frowning slightly at the social worker, as if he too takes offense at the word.

“Steven has a lot of experience with problem cases,” says the social worker. “I think he’ll know exactly what to do with you. In fact, I’m counting on it. Because I feel I should warn you, Mr. Parker, that this is absolutely your last chance. I don’t have anywhere else to put you, and if we have another incident, assuming you once again dodge jail time, you’ll likely have to leave the city. Perhaps even the state. So try, for the love of God, to rein yourself in. Life isn’t fair to any of us. That doesn’t mean we get to go around taking it out on the people who try to help, do you understand me?”

Peter feels another flare of indignation—*You think it fucking matters?*—but he swallows it down. The thought of leaving New York is worse than the possibility of jail. He might not have a home anymore, but all of the ones he *has* had were here. His parents passed on their love of this city to Peter. So did Ben.

You are allowed to defend yourself.

(In his head, Uncle Ben’s voice has faded. It no longer sounds like his uncle’s voice at all. Just an impression of an impression. And soon it will be gone.)

Peter nods.

The social worker returns this with a clipped nod of her own, and steps aside to give the man room to step forward.

“Meet your new foster father,” she says.

The man smiles again as he extends his left hand for Peter to shake. Peter takes it, and the man’s big hand swallows his entirely. But Peter does his best to match his firm grip.

“Hi Peter,” he says. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Steven Westcott. But most people just call me Skip.”

Peter tries very hard to feel something about Skip Westcott as he follows him out of the ER and to a waiting car—sensible sedan, a few years old but meticulously clean—but as soon as the social worker told him he wasn't going to jail the coursing adrenaline that has been keeping him upright was flushed away by a wave of exhaustion. His hand is throbbing now (they didn't give him any painkillers: he saw the nurse mark "high risk" somewhere on his chart when she thought he wasn't watching, so he assumes that has something to do with it), and even with the addition of meatloaf, his stomach is still growling. He takes his place in the front seat while Skip throws his duffel bag into the trunk and then concentrates all of his energy on not letting his eyes slip closed.

But beyond this faint sense that he should remain alert, Peter has nothing. Skip could be a lump of human-shaped putty for all that Peter knows or cares about him.

The social worker might have called Skip his foster father, but Peter knows better. Parents, families, homes... these are things of the past. There are only places to stay, now. And—when he can—people to help.

Skip gets into the car beside him, starts it, and pulls out of the parking lot. It's late at night, but Peter recognizes this only when he sees how empty the streets are.

He realizes he is being rude. That he's probably acting exactly like someone would expect a juvenile delinquent who just got kicked out of a home for fighting to act. Surly. Withdrawn.

He clenches his hand shut, uses the pain to pull his focus.

"Um," he says. "Mr. Westcott?"

"Skip," says Skip.

"Okay. Skip. Um, I don't know if it makes a difference, but I didn't try to, you know, shank anybody. Just in case you were wondering."

Skip doesn't respond for a second. Long enough that Peter's insides start to squirm more violently, and not just with hunger now. Suddenly he *does* feel something, and that something is a low sense of foreboding. He remembers what Felipe said about things being shitty no matter what you do, and he wonders, for the first time, where Skip is taking him.

It can't be worse than the halfway house.

Can it?

But when Skip does answer, Peter is surprised once again.

"I believe you," Skip says.

"I—you do?"

Skip nods.

"Even though—? I mean, there *was* a knife. I don't want to lie about it, there was. And it was mine. It was *definitely* mine. I just, I don't want you to think I'm dangerous or something. And I'm not lying, I just—"

Now Skip smiles softly, taking his eyes off the road for just a second to raise his eyebrow at Peter.

"Peter," he says, "didn't I just say I believed you?"

Peter closes his mouth. Frowns.

Skip chuckles and returns his attention to the road.

“You hungry?”

“I’m...”

Peter wants to say that he is starving. Maybe literally. But as soon as he thinks it, his mouth feels like it is filled with glue. He can’t form the words.

Out of this bitter stickiness and into his head, a voice rises.

(He’s testing you,) it says. Like a whisper, but loud nonetheless. (He’s looking for your weaknesses. Don’t give them to him.)

It’s not Uncle Ben’s voice. It’s not Felipe’s. It does not, in fact, belong to anyone Peter knows. He has a vision of a ghoul sitting on his shoulder and immediately wants to shake himself.

Instead he closes his mouth and obeys it.

Peter shrugs.

“I don’t want to establish a bad precedent,” says Skip, “but just about the only thing open at this time of night is McDonald’s. You have any objection to highly-processed, ethically-questionable meat?”

The last fast food Peter ate was that pizza, sitting on the curb, telling Ned about the Arlingtons and feeling sorry for himself in a way he can hardly believe just three months later. Tonight, a cheeseburger sounds like something he believed in when he was a kid but now knows to be false, like the tooth fairy, or Santa Claus.

And yet the next thing he knows, there is one sitting in his lap. It is in a grease-stained paper bag. In that bag there is also a sleeve of french fries the size of Peter’s head, and in the cup holder beside him there is a large Coke, dripping with condensation.

Watching Skip out of the corner of his eye, Peter takes a fry out of the bag and bites into it. It is greasy and salty and so hot it almost burns Peter’s mouth, and as soon as it touches his tongue a fat tear rolls out of the corner of Peter’s eye.

He turns his head sharply, pretends to look out the window. He’s sure Skip saw (*sees*, because the tears won’t stop once they’ve started, though at least they are silent), but Skip says nothing. He just drives.

“We’ll have to be quiet going in,” says Skip. “I have two others at the moment. Twin girls. They’re seven. I didn’t have a chance to tell them you’d be coming, but they should be asleep anyway, so...”

Peter nods and Skip unlocks the door. Full—really, truly full, for the first time in months—of fries and pop and cheeseburger, Peter is starting to feel floaty and distant, and even though he hears the words Skip is saying they are getting stuck in whatever part of his brain translates them into

meaning. It's like being in a dream. He just accepts whatever's put in front of him without question.

The dreamlike sensation intensifies when he sees the apartment. It's huge; at least twice as large as the one he lived in with Ben, and ten times as neat. The entrance opens onto an open-concept living area, with a kitchen as large as the whole upper floor of the halfway house to Peter's left, a cozy living room to his right.

In this living room is a girl, sitting on the sofa and watching the flat-screen TV on silent. She gets to her feet as Skip locks the door behind them, and smiles at Peter.

She's a few years older than him, and very pretty. Peter immediately blushes, surprising himself for the dozenth time since the ER: the only girl he's been around all summer is Karen, and he never thought of Karen as a *girl* girl—more like an older sister. He didn't even know he *could* think of girls like that anymore.

"Hey, Bea," says Skip. "Can you stick around a minute? I'm gonna show Peter his room."

The girl—who must be the babysitter—nods.

"Welcome home, Peter," she says.

Peter allows Skip to steer him down a hallway, now *certain* this is a dream, and bracing himself for how awful it will be when he wakes up.

But he doesn't wake up. Instead, Skip leads him to a bedroom that is small compared to the rest of the apartment but still larger than any Peter has ever slept in. Larger than Uncle Ben's room was, at the old apartment. It is mostly bare, but there is a desk with a lamp in one corner, and a full-size bed under the window, neatly made with fresh sheets.

While Peter is wondering at this beautiful mirage, Skip sets his duffel bag on the bed, goes to one of two more doors in the room and opens it, revealing a small attached bathroom.

"Just some basic toiletries—toothbrush, soap. But the towel is clean at least, if you want to take a shower. I usually do my little shpiel right about now, but I'll be honest, Peter, you look dead on your feet. Wanna save it for the morning?"

Peter nods dumbly. His fingers feel numb.

"Alrighty. Anything else you need?"

Peter shakes his head.

"Right. Well, my room is next to yours, if you think of something. 'Night, Peter."

He turns to leave.

"Wait—!"

Skip turns back. Peter feels tiny, standing in the middle of this huge room in this huge apartment, wearing his bloodstained clothes and his crooked glasses and smelling like sweat and hamburger grease. He's never felt more out of place in his entire life.

"Do you know who I am?" he says.

Skip frowns. "Only what they gave me in your file. Why?"

“Because—because I’m. I’m Peter. Peter Parker. This doesn’t—I don’t—why are you being so nice to me?”

Skip smiles as Peter’s words fail him. His eyes sweep over Peter, just once, but in that up-down glance Peter has the feeling Skip is taking in more than his appearance, and his feeling of unbelonging increases tenfold.

“Get some sleep, infamous Peter Parker,” he says. “We can talk more in the morning.”

He nods, and walks out, closing the door behind him.

“What the hell?” says the infamous Peter Parker into the darkness.

(*What the hell indeed,*) says the ghoul on his shoulder.

In the dark, Peter shivers. But he is too tired, then, to figure out why.

Peter wakes with no memory of having gotten into bed and no notion, for a second, of what has woken him.

Then he opens his eyes and finds that he is staring into someone else’s, round and blue and mere inches away from his own.

“*Augh!*” says Peter.

The pair of eyes drops out of sight as Peter scrambles to sit up and reaches for his glasses. By the time he has them perched on his nose he has registered that it is daytime, judging from the light filtering in between the curtains. For a moment he thinks he must have imagined the eyes, because a quick sweep of his room tells him it is empty, the door closed. But when he hears a giggle coming from under his bed, the pieces click into place.

Peter takes a deep breath, allowing himself a moment to get oriented. He is not in the halfway house. He is not at the Arlington’s, either. He is in an air-conditioned apartment, lying in a big bed, and the person who woke him is not some ham-fisted sixteen-year-old here to punch his guts out for being a snitch but rather—hopefully—one of the seven-year-old girls Skip spoke of last night.

Peter lets the breath out.

“Oh, no,” he says. “I think there might be a monster under my bed.”

The giggles are suddenly—and badly—stifled.

“What am I gonna do?” Peter says, feigning fear. “I have to get out of bed *somehow*, but I can’t put my feet on the floor. They might get eaten!”

Peter hears the sound of tiny teeth gnashing beneath him.

“Alright, Parker,” he says seriously. “Get it together. You don’t even know what monster you’re dealing with yet, and you don’t wanna be the kind of guy who stereotypes mythical beasts. He might be a pacifist for all you know. Or a vegetarian.”

“Am not!” says a muffled voice.

“No,” Peter corrects himself, pretending he didn’t hear, “probably not a vegetarian. But possibly a really nice guy. Or girl. Guess the only way to find out is to—look!”

At the *look*, he leans over his bed and sticks his head underneath. There is a shriek, and then a little girl in blonde pigtails comes streaking out into the open. She is wearing Iron Man pajamas and a sparkling purple tutu, and she screams as Peter jumps out of bed and chases her into a corner.

“I knew it!” he says, descending on her with wriggling fingers. “It’s a tickle monster!”

For just a second they are both caught up in the mirth of the moment, both laughing. Then—

“*Lily!*”

The mirth drains away. Peter straightens and turns around to find Skip standing in his bedroom doorway, eyes wide, staring down at the scene in front of him—a scene which includes a reddening Peter, who is already scolding himself for thinking, even for a second, that just because the scenery changed the danger might have passed.

Have the last five months taught him nothing?

“Sorry,” he says, backing toward the bed. “Sorry, I wasn’t—”

Skip’s eyes are not on Peter. They are on the little girl, Lily. But when Peter turns to her, she doesn’t look frightened. She pushes herself to her feet, panting, and runs toward Skip.

“Daddy! The new boy is a tickle monster! And he’s a vegetarian!”

Peter braces himself as Skip looks at him.

And then, amazingly, Skip’s expression softens.

“I know for a fact that he is not a vegetarian,” he says to Lily, “and it looks to me like *you’re* the monster in this scenario. Didn’t I tell you to let him sleep?”

“Sorry,” says Lily, clearly not sorry at all, “but Daddy—”

“No buts. Go wake your sister up and get dressed, Bea is going to take you to school this morning.”

“Is the tickle monster coming?”

“Nope. The tickle monster and I are going to have a talk.”

“Okay. Okay, okay, okay, okay...”

Lily continues to sing *okay* as she flounces off, out of the room and down the hallway.

Peter shuffles his feet while Skip stares at him. Skip’s expressionless face makes Peter *certain* he has done something wrong, and he thinks with a pitiful surge of self-loathing that at least at the halfway house he knew what to expect when he was in trouble. The edge of anxiety, waiting for Skip to reveal how his anger will present, is razor-sharp, the anticipation almost worse than whatever is waiting on the other end of this long silence.

“You’re good with kids,” says Skip.

Peter's shoulders snap up automatically, his body on the defensive before the words can sink in. When they do, his mouth falls open.

"I'm—what?"

"You're good with kids," Skip repeats. "My last foster kid didn't know what to do with the girls. You'd've thought they were a couple of vipers for all he wanted to do with them. But you—you're a natural, huh?"

"I'm... yeah, I guess. I mean, I like kids. And there were younger kids at the halfway house, sometimes."

Skip looks Peter up and down again. Again, Peter feels that inexplicable shiver, but this time it is mostly lost under the unexpected flush of pride. Peter used to thrive off of the praise of adults—it was one of the reasons he was such a target for bullies in elementary school. But it's been so long since he's experienced it that having that now feels like uncovering a fossil of his old life: familiar and a little foreign all at once.

"Come on," says Skip.

He leads Peter into the kitchen, where Peter is greeted by another familiar-but-unfamiliar sight: breakfast is waiting on the kitchen table. There are scrambled eggs and waffles and bacon and fresh fruit, a carafe of orange juice, a pitcher of coffee. He almost doesn't understand what it's all doing there until Skip offers him a seat and places a plate in front of him, piled high with a little bit of everything.

Peter stares at it.

"Eat," says Skip lightly.

And Peter is, incredibly, grateful for the instruction. Because for some unfathomable reason, his first instinct was *not* to eat. For just a second upon seeing the stack of waffles dripping with syrup, the fluffy eggs, the fat red strawberries, the new voice in his head screamed at him to take it and run.

Peter takes a shaky breath, picks up his knife and fork, and smiles while Skip takes the seat beside him and pours two cups of coffee.

"Again, I'm setting a bad precedent," he says, setting one in front of Peter, "but you look like you could use it. You're old enough to drink coffee, right?"

Peter has never tasted coffee in his life. But he nods, and Skip looks pleased when he takes the mug, just like he did when he praised Peter for being good with Lily.

Coffee is awful, Peter discovers. But he works very hard to turn his grimace into a smile as he takes a sip, because Skip is still watching him.

"I'd like to tell you a little bit about myself," he says.

"Okay."

Peter sets down his fork. (*Save some for later, Parker. You don't know when you'll get it again.*)

"No, keep eating. I want you to feel at home here, Peter, do you understand?"

Peter picks the fork back up, trying to hide the little tremble in his hands as he does. What the hell was *that*?

Skip doesn't notice.

"The first thing I think you should know," says Skip, "is that I've been a foster parent for almost ten years now. You've probably already noticed that I'm an unusual candidate, right? Single men aren't usually social workers' first choice for placements. But what I do is very specialized. I work specifically with kids who have had a really rough go of things, kids that have been in trouble or who have very specific needs—things that make them difficult to place otherwise. And whenever I get a new child—or young man, like yourself—I like to explain to them why.

"When I was a younger man, Peter, I had very different priorities. I was married, and I had two children—a son and a daughter—but my real love was my work. I was in finance, and it was very competitive and fast-paced and I was very good at it. My main goal—the only thing that was important to me—was making more money, because that was what made me feel important. It probably goes without saying, but my family suffered very much because of this. My obsession eventually led my wife to leave me, but even that wasn't enough of a wake-up call. I dismissed her as ungrateful, and I continued as I always had: ignorant to the pain I was causing others, so long as I got ahead.

"The real wake up call came when my son killed himself."

This time Peter sets his fork down out of shock. Skip says it bluntly, but there is a faraway look in his eyes as he does, something Peter can only recall seeing on an adult's face once in his life: on Uncle Ben's, the night his parents died.

"It was a long time ago," says Skip, catching Peter's look, "but there are some things you just don't get past. And what I found unbearable was the fact that if I had just been looking closely, I could have stopped it." He sighs. "My son, he... he had a lot of problems. When he was about your age he started getting into trouble at school. Causing fights, skipping class. Eventually he got kicked out, and it was around that time that he started drinking, taking drugs, running with all of the wrong crowds. He was in trouble with the law more often than I could keep track, but because I was so self-absorbed, I dismissed all of it as stupid teenage rebellion. I was angry with him, in fact. I thought he was doing it to spite me, and I resented that his behavior was taking time away from my job.

"When he died... it was like waking up from a terrible dream. I realized that *I* had been the stupid one, that everything my son had done was the result of a horrible, unspeakable pain, and if I had even once opened myself up to what he was trying to communicate..."

Skip swallows dryly. There are tears in his eyes, but he blinks them away, and looks at Peter directly.

"The day of my son's funeral I quit my job. I had more than enough to retire, but I knew I couldn't spend my days sitting on some beach, letting all of the money I had earned while neglecting my family go to waste. I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to make sure that what happened to my son never happened to another young man. I understood, finally, that the world was not separated into good and bad people, winners and losers, but rather into people who had been given chances and people who had not. My son didn't get his chance. But I swore I would make sure that other boys like him would get theirs any time I could help. To date, I've fostered six young men, all of whom were on the brink of jail or worse when I took them in. I've seen every last one of them off to college. I hope one day to say the same for you."

Skip reaches across the table. He takes Peter's hand.

If it's been an age since an adult praised him, it's been even longer since one touched him in a way that was not hitting or shoving or simply moving him out of the way. Even Karen was not allowed to touch the boys except to restrain them, and then only in emergencies. When Skip's big hand closes over Peter's he thinks immediately of Uncle Ben, of how casually he would offer a hug or ruffle Peter's hair, or pull him into his side while they were watching TV, and he has to blink away tears of his own.

Weirdly, though, he also has to suppress a little shudder. Maybe it's been so long he doesn't know how to react anymore, but as soon as Skip's hand squeezes, Peter doesn't know if he wants him to hold on forever or let go immediately.

Before he can decide, Skip goes on.

"I read your file, Peter," says Skip. "You've made some bad decisions. And I want to warn you now, that I don't accept that behavior in my home. I will work with you, I will listen to you—but my priority is safety, and that goes doubly in the last few years because I have the girls now. If I ever think their happiness or their wellbeing is compromised by your presence here, then you and I will say our goodbyes, do you understand?"

Peter nods.

"But just because you've made bad choices doesn't make you a bad person. I believe that with all my heart. And if you're willing to work with me, I think you and I can make some really great things happen. Do you agree?"

Peter feels tingly. The dreamy sensation of last night is back, but underneath there is a tiny light—a flame of something Peter thought he had lost the moment that mugger pulled the gun on Uncle Ben, so small and so foreign that it takes a second for Peter to recognize it as hope.

"Okay," he says.

Skip smiles and releases Peter's hand. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a StarkPhone, and hands it to Peter.

"That's a privilege," he says. "If I think you're misusing it in any way, I will take it back. But so long as you're responsible, I like you to have a way to communicate with me, all right?"

"Mr. Westcott—Skip—I really don't know what to—I mean, yes, of course. Thank you. Sir. Skip. Thank you."

Skip laughs and gets to his feet.

"It's a deal, then. Now, why don't you go back to bed? I have to get you set up at school, but that can wait until tomorrow, I think. And I need to make sure the girls aren't drenched in slime or something—and if that sounds like a weirdly specific fear, well, you'd be amazed what seven year olds can get up to." He claps Peter on the shoulder. "Welcome home son," he says. "I really am glad to have you here."

He disappears down the hallway.

Dazed, Peter finishes his waffle quickly and then stumbles back to the bedroom—*his* bedroom—trying to make sense of what has just happened. Twenty-four hours ago he was sitting at a tiny kitchen table in a house full of people who despised him, drenched in sweat and quaking with

hunger, watching as Felipe stole a knife out of the kitchen sink. Now he is so full he is almost uncomfortable, heading to a room he doesn't share with anyone, clutching a cell phone that belongs just to him.

(You're letting your guard down, Parker. Why that shiver, earlier? Why did Skip's hand on your hand make you want to run?)

(Bad shit just happens, Pedro. You gotta look out for yourself.)

(What if I don't have to?)

The last thought is the one that scares him the most.

So Peter shakes the voices away.

He enters his room, closes the door, and unlocks the phone with his clumsy, swollen hand. The Gmail app is already installed. Peter opens it.

Ned, he types, slowly, you'll never believe where I am.

Instinct

After he emails Ned, Peter falls asleep again. It's a long sleep, but restless, and when Peter blinks back to consciousness sometime in the late afternoon, it takes him a second to orient himself. He stares at the ceiling for a full thirty seconds, expecting the white paint to turn into the broken slat of Felipe's bunk at any moment.

But the white remains. So the next thing Peter does is check his phone.

He expects to see a reply from Ned. He does not expect to see seventeen replies, the first of which is *OH MY GOD!!!!*, several of which are just completely incoherent, and the last of which says, *I am outside*.

Outside? Peter stares at the word for a long time, wondering if it's some sort of typo. Outside of what?

This is when he realizes there are voices coming from the living room.

Peter looks up. The bedroom door is half-open, allowing the voices to drift through. One of them, though muffled, he recognizes as Skip's. And the other...

Peter practically trips over himself in his haste to get out of bed.

In the living room, two figures are sitting on the couch, facing away from the hallway. Even sitting down, Skip towers over the second figure, which has black hair and round shoulders and is bouncing slightly as it says something to Skip that Peter can't quite hear.

"Ned?"

Ned and Skip turn to face him.

Peter feels a surge of happiness, elation, disbelief—that's Ned, his Ned, sitting in the living room of the apartment Peter now calls home when just hours ago Peter was certain he would never see him again. Peter starts forward as Ned leaps to his feet, then—

Freezes. Just as suddenly as the happiness rose, it sloughs away in a cold front of dread, so powerful it takes Peter a disorienting moment to understand it, and even then he's not sure he does understand—isn't he *supposed* to be happy to see his best friend?

But he's not. He's... the only word for what he's feeling is *terrified*. Peter is a curse, a taboo, and while he can accept that for himself, can even live with it, especially when he can use it to help the people around him, he never, never, never wants Ned to get caught up in the terrible whirlwind of bad fortune that is his life.

Ned, catching Peter's expression, halts midway across the distance between them.

"What are you doing here?" says Peter.

Ned's face falls. Peter has never seen anyone look so disappointed, but he can't move, can't summon anything other than an almost irrepressible desire to make Ned leave. It's irrational, inexplicable: Skip has been nothing but nice to him since he arrived. But the animal part of Peter is screaming at him to get Ned out, get him away, the same way it screamed at him to take the food and run this morning.

Skip gets to his feet slowly.

"It's okay, Peter," he says. "Ned and I were just getting acquainted."

Swallowing, Peter turns to Skip.

"I didn't give him your address," he says. "I don't even *know* your address."

"I found it myself," says Ned. "I basically just Googled all the Westcotts in Midtown, it wasn't even like, hard. Peter, I thought—"

"It's not Ned's fault," says Peter. "I just—I was telling him I had a new—a new place to stay, I didn't think he would actually show up, I know I'm not supposed to—please don't blame him. It's my bad."

"Woah, woah, woah," says Skip, holding up his hands, frowning. "Peter, you're not in trouble. You're allowed to have friends over."

The worry doesn't disappear, but it does go stagnant.

"I am?"

Skip laughs. It's a little awkward, but not unkind.

"Yeah. I told you this morning, I want you to feel at home here. Granted, I'd normally appreciate some warning" —he glances at Ned, and once again something foreign and absurd flares in the back of Peter's mind: the instinct to jump in front of his friend— "but Ned here seems like an okay cookie. And I can understand why he's eager, it sounds like you two haven't seen each other in a while."

Peter swallows and nods.

"Come sit down," Skip says. "Ned was just about to tell me some exciting news."

Dumbly, Peter follows Ned back to the couch. Sits beside him and can hardly believe he's real, even when their sides are pressed together.

While Skip takes the armchair across from them, Ned mouths, *Holy shit, dude*, and gestures at the apartment, wide-eyed.

I know, Peter mouths back.

Skip waits until he has their attention to speak.

"So," he says, "Ned was just telling me you used to go to Midtown. That's very impressive, Peter. It's not in the file they gave me."

Peter gulps, shrugs. The edge hasn't quite faded—he still feels tense, like he's waiting for a blow to fall. But Skip is still smiling, so he says,

“Yeah, um. I only did seventh grade though, before—before I moved.”

“Peter was the smartest kid there,” says Ned. “He had a scholarship and everything.”

“Ned, you don't have to—”

“And I know he missed eighth grade,” Ned plows on, “but the new semester just started a week ago and I talked to Principal Morita today and he said that if Peter can still test into all the grade-level classes he'd be willing to consider letting him do late registration because of the circumstances and whatever, and Peter can definitely test into all the classes because, like I said, he was the smartest kid in school. And no offense, Mr. Westcott, but I think it would be super uncool of you if you didn't at least, like, consider it. Because really, is there anything worse than um, unrecognized potential? And I know it's kind of expensive, but I can get Peter a transit pass and if he signs up for the same classes as me we can share books, and—”

“Ned, it's okay, I don't—Mr. Westcott, school is really expensive and—”

“But school is important,” says Ned pointedly, in a way that makes Peter think he rehearsed this argument many times on his way over. “It's an investment in our futures. In Peter's future. And I just really, really, *really* think you should consider it, Mr. Westcott, because no matter what they said about Peter in his—his file or whatever, he's the best person I've ever known. He deserves this.”

Ned goes red as he says it, and his hands are clenched on his knees like he is desperately holding on to every ounce of courage available, but he doesn't break eye contact with Mr. Westcott, and when he finishes speaking he clenches his jaw and continues to hold it.

Peter, though, has to look away. His eyes are prickling.

Skip looks between the pair of them, still smiling mildly.

“Well, Ned, you've certainly convinced me.”

Both boys let out identical breaths. Peter hadn't even realized he was holding his.

“I—I have?” says Ned.

“Yes, though to be fair, I'm probably not the holdout you were expecting,” says Skip. “Education is the main focus in all of the work I do with my boys. I had planned to look into schools for you today as it was, Peter. I had no idea you were so gifted, or Midtown would have been top of the list anyway. But it's still lucky you're here, Ned, because I have a feeling Peter isn't one to toot his own horn about these things.”

Skip winks at Peter, whose mouth is hanging open. To Ned, he says,

“Give me Principal Morita's number. I'll call him first thing in the morning. Now, do you boys want something to eat while you catch up? I have pizza rolls.”

Ned immediately springs into action, fumbling in a backpack at his feet that Peter hadn't noticed until now and jumping to his feet to give Skip the little slip of paper he pulls out of it.

Peter, on the other hand, is too stunned to move. He can't remember the last time anything was this

easy. Even when he was living with Uncle Ben, good things didn't just *happen*, at least not without some sort of emotional or financial tug-of-war. School, in particular, had always been a source of tension: even though Ben never, ever complained, Peter knew his tuition had been a burden, even with his scholarship. Knew Ben had taken extra shifts and spent long nights poring over receipts, trying to make up for the deficit.

But Skip didn't even blink.

(What could that mean, Peter? Because you know it's not you. Good things don't happen to Peter Parker, so think, stupid. What does it mean?)

"Do you want to show Ned your room?"

Peter jolts and gets to his feet.

"Yeah. Sorry, I—"

"Actually," says Ned, "I have to go. I'm—my mom—but—thank you for um, having me and—"

"Anytime, Ned. A friend of Peter's is a friend of mine. Why don't you walk your friend out, Pete?"

Numbly, Peter gets to his feet and follows Skip to the front door, Ned trailing in his wake. Skip waves them out, silently pressing a key into Peter's palm as he passes and winking again. He closes the door after them.

Ned and Peter are silent as they walk down the hall and into the elevator. But as soon as the doors close over them, Ned tackles him.

"Oh my god," he says, "oh my god, oh my god, you're alive dude. You're alive and you have all your limbs and you don't have a bunch of prison tattoos on your face and you're *here*. I can't believe it. This is the best day of my life."

At last, a smile works its way onto Peter's face as he staggers under the weight of his friend's hug, and reaches up awkwardly with his uninjured hand to return it.

"Wow, you must have a pretty low bar, Ned. I'm actually a little insulted. What about Comic-Con twenty thirteen? Did I get you those tickets for nothing?"

Ned disentangles himself and punches Peter lightly on the arm.

"Oh my God, you're not seriously being a smartass right now, Parker."

Peter continues to grin until Ned steps back, and Peter sees there are tears in his eyes. Ned wipes them quickly, but not quickly enough. Peter's grin fades.

"Oh, man, Ned, I'm—I'm so sorry, I didn't mean... I'm okay, man. Look, I'm right here."

"I can't believe it happened *twice*, dude. You just freaking... disappeared. *Again*."

The elevator dings. The boys step absently into the reception area, and Peter only vaguely recognizes that there is a front desk *and* a doorman—meaning Skip must have even more money than he originally guessed—while Ned leads him across the entranceway and onto the sidewalk just outside.

"I'm sorry," says Peter. "I wanted to call you, Ned. I wanted to call you so bad, but I couldn't."

“Were you really in prison?”

“What? No! Of course I wasn’t—who said I was in prison?”

“Flash, mostly. But it was like, the rumor of the century last semester. Everyone said you went nuts and tried to kill your foster family. It was insane, dude, but I couldn’t get a hold of you and the teachers wouldn’t say anything about what actually did happen so—”

Peter groans and puts his face in his hands, then removes them immediately when his injured palm gives a painful throb.

“Woah, Peter, what happened to your hand?”

Peter shakes his head. “It’s nothing. It’s complicated. I’ll tell you I just—Ned, I can’t believe you’re here. I can’t believe you got me back into school. How—how did you do it so fast?”

Ned wipes his eyes on the back of his wrist again, but the tears aren’t coming as freely anymore. He sniffs.

“Uh, more like how could I be so slow. I went straight to Morita as soon as you emailed this morning. I skipped first period. I would have skipped the rest of the day, but then they would have called my mom and, well, you know. Ugh, speaking of—”

Ned looks at his watch, then over his shoulder at the beginnings of the rush hour traffic in the street beyond. He gives Peter a strained look.

“It’s fine,” says Peter. “You’ve already—I don’t even know how to thank you.”

Ned reaches into the front pocket of his jeans and pulls out—a flip phone. It’s tiny and so outmoded Peter almost doesn’t recognize it as a phone until Ned presses it into his hands.

“You can thank me,” he says, “by using that.”

“Uh, thanks Ned, but Skip actually got me a phone. A freaking *StarkPhone*, and—”

“Okay, that is insanely cool and we *will* be talking about *all* of this as soon as I get home, but right now just shut up for a second. That’s a burner phone.”

Peter raises an eyebrow.

“This is very Q of you, Ned.”

“Yes, it is, and also don’t make fun of me, because you know this is a good idea. I got it at the bodega at lunch. I only prepaid twenty bucks, so you should only use it for emergencies, but it’s small and it’s worth pretty much nothing, so if you’re ever—if you ever need to, you can hide it. And you can use it to call me. And—”

Ned snatches the phone back, flips it open, and points to the number one, which he has colored in with a red Sharpie.

“Panic button,” he says. “I did it during study hall. There’s a tiny tracker inside—you remember the robotics camp I did two summers ago? I made a bunch of them for my drones—so if you press it, your location gets sent straight to my phone. That way if you ever can’t call me—I’ll still know where you are.”

It’s Peter’s turn: tears well up in his eyes before he can help himself.

“This is—” Peter swallows. “I’ve really missed you, Ned.”

Ned hugs him again. It’s briefer than the one in the elevator, but just as good.

“I will see you,” says Ned, “at school. Which is just—” He pulls away and makes the universal sign for *mind-blowing*. He looks up at the building they’ve just left. “Skip is actually pretty cool, isn’t he?”

A small shiver runs up the length of Peter’s spine, just like when Skip took his hand last night.

(*Irrational.*)

(*Isn’t it?*)

“Yeah,” says Peter, “I guess he is.”

Ned immediately resumes his barrage of text messages and email the second Peter is back in the apartment, and since Skip is in the kitchen, Peter retreats to his room to slowly fill Ned in on the events of the last few months. Ned’s righteous indignation on his behalf is a panacea for his throbbing hand and the lingering disbelief about the halfway house—disbelief that it happened at all, as well as disbelief that he is actually *out*—but somehow doesn’t soothe the buzz in the back of his skull, nor the chittering little ghoul on his shoulder. Peter knows he is supposed to feel safe now, but somehow he feels even more on edge than he did at the halfway house. He keeps expecting his social worker to pop up and tell him there’s been an enormous mistake.

Which is why when Skip actually does pop into his room about thirty minutes after Ned leaves, Peter jumps so hard he almost falls off the bed. He scrambles to his feet, stuffing the StarkPhone into his back pocket alongside the burner phone, heat rising on the back of his neck.

Skip doesn’t laugh, though. He looks Peter up and down, the way he did last night, and says, “Come into the living room for a minute. I want you to meet the girls.”

Peter follows him back to the living area, where the babysitter from last night, Bea, is helping the girls out of their backpacks and rain boots. The twins are perfectly identical, down to their matching outfits—dresses slathered in pictures of horses over pink leggings—but Peter knows which one is Lily right away, because as soon as she sees him she gasps, flails out of her jacket, and wraps her arms around his knees.

“You aren’t sleeping so I’m allowed to do this now,” she informs him. “Emma. Emma, look. New brother, Emma!”

“Hey, Lily.” Peter puts a hand on her head and feels, for the first time since she sneaked into his room that morning, calm. Kids, at least, he can handle. Kids don’t drink and carry around rolled-up magazines in case they want to swat you like you’re a poisonous insect. Kids don’t put locks on the front door and the refrigerator and sneer at you like they wish you were dead every time they’re in the same room. Kids are safe. “Is this your sister?”

“Uh-huh. Emma, come say hi. Come on!”

But where her sister is all enthusiasm, Emma shrinks behind Bea the moment Peter looks at her.

Despite all Lily's bright-eyed babbling and easy trust, it appears Emma does not feel the same way about Peter as Peter does about her. She peers at him with a dark, cautious expression, her hands wrapped in Bea's coat until the babysitter gently untangles them.

"Sorry, Em," says Bea. "And sorry, Mr. Westcott. I have homework."

"It's fine, Bea. Thanks for hanging with them while I sorted Peter out, there'll be a little extra in your next check."

Skip steps forward, takes Emma's hand, and guides her out from behind Bea, who smiles at Peter as she takes her leave (he feels himself blush furiously, but he can't do anything about it, as he's currently chained to his spot by Lily). Emma follows Skip without objection, but as soon as the barrier between her and Peter is gone she sticks her thumb in her mouth, making her look much younger than seven. She doesn't take her eyes off Peter as Skip leads her to the living room, where he sits her on the couch and hands her a tablet. Only when it's on her lap and playing some garishly bright cartoon does Emma look away, though Peter notices her eyes flicker onto him occasionally even as she becomes absorbed in the show.

"Don't feel bad," says Lily, "she's always like that. I wanna show you my room, come on."

Lily unravels her arms from around Peter's knees and takes his hand.

"Um," says Peter, "is it okay with your dad?"

"He's your dad too, silly."

Peter's flush deepens, but this time it has nothing to do with Bea.

Skip, who is already making his way back to the kitchen, says, "I'm Peter's foster father, Lily, but I'm not his dad. He'll call me Skip, like DeMarcus did. And to answer your next question, yes, you may show Peter your room. Dinner's on in twenty."

Lily redoubles her grip on Peter's hand and pulls him down the hall.

"You and me," she says, "are gonna be *best* friends."

Peter glances over his shoulder just before Lily drags him around the corner. Emma watches them go.

The rest of the evening passes in a surreal blur. Lily shows him the room she shares with Emma. She introduces him to each of her toys individually, and talks so steadily that there is virtually no pressure on Peter to respond, which he finds is a welcome relief. Despite having slept the night and most of the day, he feels fatigued almost to the point of disconnectedness—like he's in a waking dream.

The feeling intensifies at dinner. Skip has made pasta and chicken; Peter notices Skip gives him the most generous portion. Peter is grateful at first, then confused: the moment he begins to eat his mouth goes dry.

He thinks of Felipe and Arnold and his stomach flips.

Peter only manages to finish his plate because he can see Skip checking up on him out of the corner of his eye, and then the pasta sits like cement in his belly. It's a relief when Skip excuses them, and not just because of the weirdness with his food: Emma still hasn't said a word, though she did stare at him throughout the meal with watchful, distrustful eyes.

When Peter gets back to his room, he is surprised when he looks down and sees he has a dinner roll clutched in one hand. He doesn't remember taking it. But rather than bring it back to the kitchen, he finds a plastic bag in one of his desk drawers and zips the roll inside. He sticks it on the highest shelf in his closet, behind a stack of t-shirts Skip left there for him, and then scrambles into bed and pulls the covers to his chin.

"What's wrong with me?" he whispers.

For once, the darkness does not reply.

As he hands Peter the stack of tests, Principal Morita says, "I'm glad to give you this opportunity, Peter, but I'm going to tell you the same thing I told Mr. Westcott when he called me: there aren't going to be second chances here. Midtown takes academia seriously, but beyond grades, we also expect a level of behavior that reflects the values and ethics of our school. Understand?"

Peter understands very clearly: Principal Morita has read his file.

I'm the infamous Peter Parker, he thinks as he nods.

He gets it. He'd probably be wary around himself, too, if he believed some of the stuff Principal Morita has read about him. But still, Peter can't help the flush of satisfaction that rises when Principal Morita returns with a stack of graded scantrons, wearing a faintly-concealed expression of disbelief.

"This probably goes without saying, Mr. Parker," says Morita, "but welcome to Midtown."

After they have him sit for his tests, it takes the school another week to set Peter up to actually attend. It takes Peter longer than that to get used to the fact that he can go outside whenever he wants. Every time he approaches Skip to ask if he can walk around the neighborhood or go to the library or meet Ned after school he feels nauseated with worry, and every time Skip says yes it's like someone has pulled a ripcord on muscles he didn't even realize he was holding taut, allowing him to loosen up and breathe. Noticing he does this doesn't get rid of it, though it does add a healthy dose of shame to the confusing cocktail of his emotions.

The shame isn't aided by the growing pile of food in Peter's closet. After that first night he discovered an attic hatch in the ceiling, and the little crawl space contained therein has become the hiding space for his stash. Peter quickly becomes strategic about what he takes: it's mostly sealed food now, cans of soup and bags of chips or cookies, things that will last and are small enough Skip won't notice they're missing—even though Peter knows Skip would probably just give them to him if he asked.

He doesn't know why he does this, either. He only knows the little ghoul on his shoulder purrs every time he adds to his pile.

Lately, it's the only time it's quiet.

Yet for all the tension, things are, for the first time in almost as long as Peter can remember, good. He has a room all to himself. He and Ned talk constantly when they aren't meeting up after school, planning all of the things they're going to do when Peter starts his classes. When Peter gets home in the afternoons he reads on his phone and watches TV in the living room and plays with Lily when she gets home from one of the many after-school programs she and Emma are enrolled in. Lily adores him, and Peter adores her back—she's bright and precocious, and she is the only person in his life who not only knows nothing about his past, but doesn't care even one bit. She's a relief he didn't know he needed, but now that he has it, he wouldn't give it up for the world.

Emma, on the other hand, still won't have anything to do with him. Skip assures him it's normal. "Don't take it personally," he says. "She's been like this ever since they came to live here. We're working on it, but it's not yours to worry about, okay?"

Peter does worry. The look in Emma's eyes when she's watching him reminds him of the look in Felipe's the night he told Peter about Mariña and the stolen laundry detergent. But Skip's right: there's nothing he can do to convince her he isn't a threat except to not be one. So Peter smiles and keeps his distance whenever they're in the same room, and for now it seems like it's enough. At the very least she no longer hides whenever she sees him.

As for Skip...

Skip is great. From the first he has made it clear that he's available should Peter ever want to talk, but he hasn't once been overbearing. Since he doesn't work, he spends most mornings volunteering with the foster program, and his afternoons are for the girls and their piano lessons and gymnastics and soccer teams. At first Peter is amazed that Skip leaves him all alone in the airy apartment, surrounded by expensive things. But when he voices these concerns Skip just says, "You've been very trustworthy so far, Peter. I'd prefer to bet on your goodness and be disappointed than set an unfair precedent of strictness. You won't disappoint me, will you?"

Peter won't. The more he realizes that his freedom is real, the more desperate he is to keep it. The more approval Skip gives him, the more he craves.

It's why he doesn't tell Skip about the little voice, or about the stash of food.

Besides, the voices are wrong. Whatever is making him add to the stash is wrong. And maybe, just maybe, Felipe was wrong too. Maybe things can turn out okay. Maybe Peter doesn't have to constantly wonder about how this recent streak of good luck will unravel, and maybe the hint of a shudder Peter still feels when he catches Skip looking at him when he thinks Peter isn't paying attention is just another manifestation of the same irrationality—not evidence of something bad, just evidence that Peter himself is a little bit broken. And if that's the case, he's not going to risk this sudden, inexplicable fortune by admitting it. Because even if Felipe *was* wrong, and even if good things *do* happen, he was right about one thing: Peter can take care of himself.

The night before school starts, Peter receives a surprise.

Having spent the day at the library, feeding an irrational worry that, despite his test scores, he will be behind everyone who had the benefit of an eighth grade education that took place in an actual school, Peter arrives at the apartment that evening to find Skip, the girls, and Ned, gathered around a birthday cake.

“Surprise!” they all shout.

And so Peter, flushing, sits down to his first birthday celebration since Ben died.

“Did we surprise you?” Lily asks, crawling into Peter’s lap after he blows out the candles. “Daddy didn’t tell me either because he said I’d ruin it.”

“Your dad’s pretty wise,” says Peter. “And yeah, considering my birthday was two months ago, I’d say I’m very surprised.”

“It was Ned’s idea,” says Skip. He’s leaning back in his chair, sipping a beer and watching Peter with a lopsided grin. “He told me you hadn’t had a proper party. He set this all up, I’m just the money man.”

“Happy birthday,” says Ned. “And before you get all, *Oh, Ned, you’re too nice, you do too much*, yes I am and yes I do. You can repay me by throwing me an awesome surprise party on my birthday. The new Star Wars comes out right around then, hint, hint.”

“Happy fourteenth, Peter,” says Skip.

It is, by far, the best night Peter has had since Ben died. They eat cake play charades, exchange stories, make popcorn. Even Emma joins in for a round of Candyland, though she lets a more-than-willing Lily take charge of drawing her cards and moving her piece. After the girls go to sleep, Peter and Ned stay up playing video games and losing track of the time, until finally Ned’s mom calls, and he bids Peter farewell.

“See you at school dude,” Ned says as he leaves. He makes the *mind blown* sign again.

Peter’s mind *is* blown. He’s full of cake and snacks. He’s sleepy and happy, and tomorrow he’s going to a real school, where he will attend real classes with his best friend. Peter grins as he closes the door behind Ned, turns around and—

Skip is standing right behind him. Peter jumps, grin sliding off, and takes a step back before he can help himself. Skip is much closer than he usually is, and now that he’s nearby Peter can smell the beer on his breath. Skip’s had one in his hand all night, but Peter didn’t even think about it until now; the smell of bitter yeast makes Peter’s head spin with memories of Mrs. Arlington.

He gulps and forces himself to smile. This isn’t the Arlingtons. Plenty of adults drink. Peter has seen Skip have a drink with dinner on more than one occasion, though, granted, not usually more than one. Now Skip is clearly a little drunk: his eyes are just slightly out of focus as he smiles down at Peter.

“Thanks for the party,” Peter says. “It was really great.”

He’s hoping Skip will step aside, let him go to bed. Instead, he steps closer.

“You deserve it, you know.”

The ghoul is hissing in his ear—Skip is too close, (*too close*)—but Peter forces himself to smile wider, to silence it.

“Thanks Skip. Um, I should get ready for bed, it’s—”

“I see you, you know.” Skip presses on, his voice slurring just slightly. “You keep your chin up, Peter, but I see how hard this is for you, all this newness. I just think you should know, you’re a really remarkable kid. Just really remarkable. After all you’ve been through... and you’re so intelligent, so good with the girls... you should be so proud of yourself. I know I am.”

“Um, thank you, I—”

But before Peter can try to slip around him, Skip leans forward and pulls Peter into a hug.

It’s not like Ben’s hugs. It’s not a quick, affectionate squeeze or a reassuring touch. Skip presses his whole body against Peter’s, and since Skip is so much bigger, so much taller, Peter is completely enveloped by it, his arms pinned to his sides. And Skip doesn’t let go right away. He hangs on, increasing the pressure and running one hand up and down the length of Peter’s back.

Every muscle in Peter’s body goes rigid. He can’t move—he can’t even draw a breath.

(Too close, too close, too close!)

Just when Peter thinks he might snap, Skip inhales deeply, sighs, and releases him.

“Go to bed, Peter,” he says. “You’ve got a big day ahead of you tomorrow.”

Does Peter imagine it, or does Skip sound faintly disappointed?

He doesn’t pause long enough to think about it. Heart pounding, still holding his breath, Peter practically runs for his room, where he shuts his door behind him before he allows himself to draw a gulp of air.

For the first time, Peter notices there isn’t a lock on his door.

“Get a hold of yourself, Parker,” he murmurs. “Come on, you’re being irrational.”

(Aren’t I?)

He is. He’s being irrational. This is like the food—he’s reacting to something that isn’t there. There is plenty of food in the house and hugs are normal, a normal way to show affection. *He* is the one who isn’t normal, and if he doesn’t clamp down on this he’s going to lose everything right when things are finally starting to look up.

“You’re being crazy,” he says to himself.

(Good things don’t happen to Peter Parker)

Peter puts his pajamas on quickly and climbs into bed, drawing his blankets up to his chin. He doesn’t fall asleep for a long time.

He wakes again less than hour later. Down the hall, someone is screaming.

Irrationality

Peter leaps out of bed before he is fully awake. His legs tangle in the sheets and he falls to his knees painfully, bruising them, but he doesn't pause to think about it. Back on his feet, Peter charges out of his room and down the hall, where the girls' door is always left slightly ajar. He bursts in without thinking, only realizing that he is barefoot and unarmed when he fumbles for the light switch and braces himself to see—

Nothing. It's just Lily and Emma, both sitting up in their beds.

Lily is the one who is screaming.

For a second Peter thinks he's mixing them up: he's never seen Lily be anything but effervescent, happy and giggling. But any doubt is washed away when she reaches for him, still sobbing, and says, "Peter!"

Peter crosses the room and wraps his arms around her. Lily latches on immediately, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his torso, so Peter lifts her out of bed and turns around to sit on it, holding her in his lap.

"What happened?" he says. "Lily, are you hurt?"

But Lily is crying too hard to speak, so Peter holds onto her, making shushing noises and trying to calm his own hammering heart. Over Lily's shoulder, he looks at Emma. She's not crying, but she is pale and looks even smaller than she normally does, her shoulders hunched up to her ears, her blanket clutched to her chest.

"Are you okay, Emma?" he says.

Emma hesitates—then nods.

"She's not!" Lily sobs. "She's not, they were hurting her!"

"Shh, Lily, it's okay. It's okay, look, Emma's fine. She's okay."

Peter gets to his feet and turns around, so that Lily can see Emma over his shoulder. He stands like that until Lily's sobs turn to hiccups.

"Shh, see?" he says. "See, she's okay. Okay?"

Lily nods against his cheek, and Peter turns around again.

He receives a start. Skip is standing in the doorway.

Peter gets the same crumpled feeling in his stomach he had when Lily snuck into his room the first morning, and when Ned appeared unannounced in the living room. Skip's face is blank for a moment, and the unreadability of his expression is more unnerving than anger would be—Peter doesn't know how to brace himself.

Then Skip smiles.

"Hey girlies," he says, stepping into the room. "Bad night?"

Lily gasps and disentangles herself from around Peter's waist. She runs into Skip's arms and he

scoops her up.

“Aw, baby, it’s alright,” he says, “it’s okay, it’s okay. It’s just one of your nightmares, it’s not real.”

Peter suddenly feels useless. He stands at the center of the room, arms empty, inexplicably embarrassed, still battling that first instinct of fight or flight. His adrenaline is pounding, but his brain is catching up to the situation.

No danger. Just a bad dream.

Skip catches his eye.

“I’m sorry, Peter, I was out like a light. I should have been quicker. You can go back to bed.”

Peter blinks, then looks at Emma. She is still watching him.

“Are you okay?” he asks again.

He doesn’t want to leave without making sure.

Emma nods again, and then, to Peter’s shock, whispers the first words she’s said to him since he arrived.

“I’m okay.”

“Okay. Um. Sorry, I’ll just...”

Face red, Peter starts to leave.

Skip puts a hand on his shoulder as he passes.

There is a brief, lighting impulse to throw the hand off. Peter stops himself just short of jerking back—instead he goes stiff, just like he did under the weight of Skip’s hug.

But Skip doesn’t pull him in this time. He just squeezes Peter’s shoulder, once, and then drops his hand.

“We’ll talk in the morning,” he says softly.

Peter nods, trying not to make his hesitance obvious as he skirts around him.

Skip shuts the door.

Peter wakes for his first day of school feeling like he hasn’t rested at all. He set his alarm to go off early, afraid he would oversleep, but now he stays in bed until the last possible moment, mulling over the events of the last twenty-four hours and dreading the moment he has to go out into the kitchen, where he can hear Skip making breakfast.

It was just a hug. Just a friendly squeeze of the shoulder. Just a nightmare, and for once the nightmare wasn’t his.

But Peter feels... dread. Constant, low-grade, nauseating dread. It's like being back at the Arlingtons, waiting for the next blow to fall. It's like hearing Felipe's moans of hunger in the middle of the night, or sitting in the dark, listening for the door to signal that Ben was home from the late shift.

(Broken broken broken.)

Is this how he's going to be for the rest of his life?

(Irrational.)

"Peter?"

At Skip's call, Peter stops dallying. He grabs the backpack Skip bought for him, stuffs the burner phone in his back pocket and the StarkPhone in the front, and heads into the kitchen.

Bea is there already, helping the girls into their coats. Peter pauses, wondering if he's ruined something by seeing Lily so vulnerable, if he's messed everything up by sticking his nose where it didn't belong—

"Peter!" Lily runs to him, hugs his legs. "Good morning, good morning. Daddy told me to tell you to have a good first day at school, so have a good day, okay?"

Before Peter can answer, she skips back to Bea.

Peter blinks. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Skip set his mouth in a grim line.

"Thanks, Lily," Peter says. "I hope you have a good day too. You and Emma."

Something happens then, something that is both unexpected and affirms that Peter did not hallucinate the events of last night. Emma steps forward, hugs him briefly, and hurries back to Bea.

There is a moment of shared shock where Peter, Bea, and Skip exchange raised eyebrows, and then Skip steps forward, clearing his throat.

"Okay girls. Off you go."

Bea snaps out of it. She smiles at Peter and shuffles the girls out the door.

Leaving him alone with Skip.

"Come sit down," Skip says.

Peter does, apprehensive. Skip sets a plate of fresh fruit and yogurt in front of him. Peter's fingers twitch, but he doesn't pick up his spoon, just watches while Skip takes the seat across from him.

"I owe you an apology," says Skip quietly.

"No, it's okay. I'm—for what?"

"For last night," says Skip. "I had a little too much to drink, I shouldn't have slept through Lily's nightmare. Thank you for taking care of her until I got there."

Peter is relieved he isn't in trouble, but still, his stomach won't settle. He finds himself fighting the urge to pocket the apples on his plate, and he folds his hands in his lap to still them.

“Does that happen a lot?” he says. “I mean, is she okay? I thought... I just wouldn’t have expected it, I guess. Not from Lily.”

Skip sighs. “I try not to talk about it with my boys until I’m sure they’re going to fit in,” he says. “The girls are in a... sensitive position, and kids can be thoughtless—I don’t like to risk triggering their episodes. But I think you deserve an explanation. And I think you’ve proven you have the girls’ best interests at heart.”

“Did something happen to them?”

Skip nods. “I know you’re no stranger to the cruelties of the world, Peter, but even so, I don’t want to burden you... and on your first day of school...”

“No, it’s okay. I mean, it’s not okay, but I want to know. I want to help.”

Skip smiles, but a little sadly.

“You are a helper, aren’t you? I’m seeing that more and more.” He sighs. The smile disappears. “Peter, those girls come from a very troubled background. Their birth parents were... not equipped, to say the least. Their mother was addicted to heroin, and so the girls were born addicted as well. She abandoned them at the hospital, and for the first few years of their lives they were bounced between family members and foster homes. Sometimes I thank the stars I don’t know all the details of what happened to them, but I know enough to say that they were very badly abused by their first homes. They were too young to remember most of it, but Emma has scars on her back in the shape of cigarette burns, and for the first year I had them Lily would scream like she was being tortured any time she saw a man with a beard... things like that leave a mark, even when they don’t leave a memory.”

Peter’s hands are shaking.

(Bad things just happen.)

They shouldn’t, though. The idea that anyone could do something like that to those girls is sickening.

Skip gives Peter a second to compose himself before he goes on.

“There were a few families before me,” he says, “who tried with the girls. Good people. Good intentions. But even though the girls don’t really remember what happened to them when they were little, abuse has invisible effects. Their behavior was... well, to put it plainly, Peter, it was nightmarish. Screaming fits, violence, sleeplessness. They would pull their own hair out, attack anyone who tried to stop them. Attack their foster siblings. Attack their foster parents. When the foster program approached me about taking them in, it was an absolute last resort—my focus was on teenage boys, like yourself, and I admit the thought of taking two potentially dangerous young girls was daunting. But I had enough experience with difficult cases at that point, and besides—they had nowhere else to go. Perhaps it sounds strange but I felt it was... my duty, I suppose, to look out for them.”

(You gotta look out for yourself, Pedro.)

(That’s not right, Felipe. Sometimes you have to look out for other people. Otherwise things like this happen. Otherwise people shoot unarmed men in alleyways and tell kids they can’t eat and put cigarettes out on little girls’ backs. And then it can’t just be about me.

All at once, the embarrassment from last night returns, but this time it is not because he feels like

an intruder on a private moment. It is because he was suspicious: suspicious of Skip last night when he hugged Peter; suspicious again when he first heard Lily scream.

(Broken broken broken.)

But it isn't Skip. It's him.

"I'm..." Peter croaks. "God, I'm so sorry."

"No, no, no, I'm not telling you because I want you to feel bad, Peter. I told you, I want to apologize. The girls and I have done a lot of work in the last two years, but as you can see there's a ways to go. They handle it differently. Emma... well, you see how she is, she doesn't trust anybody except me and Bea. And you now, it seems."

Underneath the shame, a flicker of pride.

"And Lily," Skip goes on. "Lily is a spitfire. You know. But underneath all that spunk... her way of coping is by blocking things out. The nightmares are a result, though I thought we had them mostly under control. Last night was probably my fault, too. I let her have too much birthday cake. Too much sugar. I'm sorry, you must have slept terribly."

Peter shakes his head. "I slept fine," he lies. "I was just worried."

"I know. I meant what I said last night, Peter. You're an excellent kid."

Peter smiles again, a little wider this time. He feels shaky with relief—his fears were unfounded. Everything *is* okay: it's just his brain, making mountains out of molehills, his wires all jumbled up, receiving too many signals. He *can* get this under control, and everything will be fine.

"Can I—?" Peter swallows. "Can I help with the girls? At all? Is there anything I can do?"

Skip grins, now.

"All you have to do," he says, "is keep being the wonderful older brother you've been so far. And concentrate on your school work. Which—speaking of! Your first day starts in twenty minutes. I've almost made you late. Come on, I'll drive you."

They both get to their feet. Peter is about to head for the door, but before he can, Skip pulls him into another hug.

The reassurance of the last ten minutes slides away. Skip squeezes just a little too tight, almost like he is trying to show Peter how strong he is, and suddenly Peter is not in the kitchen anymore. He is in the backseat of a crumpled car. He is lying in the bed under the stairs. He is crammed into a corner, trying to avoid Ryan's fists—

(too close too close)

—and then it ends. Skip releases him. Rubs his hands up and down Peter's arms once. Walks away.

Peter shakes his head. He presses his hands into his eyes, presses the unwelcome memories away.

He gets a hold of himself. And he goes to school.

“No. No way. This is a violation of our constitutional right to safety, or something.”

Peter feels heat rise in the back of his neck as he makes his way to his seat and drops into it, resisting the urge to look around. He can feel every pair of eyes in the room on him—every pair, that is, except Flash’s, which are almost as wide as his gawping mouth, and are currently fixed on the teacher, who has just introduced Peter to the class.

“If you’re done with the melodramatics, Flash,” she says, and she returns her attention to the whiteboard. “We were learning about covalent bonds.”

Peter doesn’t miss the look she gives him as he turns, however. She has just as many doubts as Flash.

Even though he didn’t expect anything more, it still stings.

He doesn’t have time to dwell on it. Flash, who is seated one row ahead of Peter, whips around to face him.

“How did you manage to weasel your way back in here, Parker?” he demands.

“Is it true you pushed an old lady off a fire escape?” says the blonde girl sitting next to him

Peter groans, but the girl, far from deterred by Peter’s imagined violent streak, sticks a hand out.

“Betty Brant,” she says. “Midtown High morning announcements, editor of the Daily Happenings portion of the school newspaper. Any chance I could get an interview? The prison system is broken, Peter, and most of the kids here are like, so privileged. They could use an insider’s perspective on what juvie is really like.”

“You are not actually encouraging him right now,” Flash hisses. “Parker’s a total suck up goody-two-shoes brown-noser, and he’s like, an attempted murderer. I’m complaining to the school board.”

He and Betty Brant start bickering in low whispers. It’s distracting enough that Peter, who is actually pretty determined to prove he’s *not* a dangerous delinquent, and doesn’t want to start his first day falling behind in class because of *Flash* of all people, leans forward.

“Flash,” he whispers, “are you gonna shut up long enough for me to start being a goody-two shoes brown-nosing suck-up, or am I going to have to violate your constitutional right to safety to make you?”

Flash turns red and opens his mouth, but before he can make his indignant retort, he’s cut off by a snort of laughter.

Peter turns around. The girl behind him is smirking behind a sheaf of dark, curly hair. He starts to smile at her, relieved that one person, at least, isn’t terrified of him, but before he can make eye contact she buries her nose in a copy of *Paradise Lost*, which is open on her desk.

“Since Mr. Parker is confident enough on his first day to not pay attention,” says the teacher, “perhaps he would like to tell us what a banana bond is?”

Peter turns around, his ears burning. Flash smirks—until Peter gets the question right.

Peter tries to catch the girl's eye at the end of class—lord knows he could use any friend he can get—but she is out the door the second the bell rings, head bent, arms full of books.

The bookish girl's rejection turns out to be a good predictor of the rest of the day, at least in terms of how the rest of the school treats Peter. By third period he's almost missing the school he went to when he lived with the Arlingtons: the kids there might have gone out of their way to torment him, but at least they acknowledged his existence.

"I think I might have died in my sleep," he says when he finds Ned in the lunchroom. "Am I a ghost? Am I invisible? Please tell me you can see me."

By way of response, Ned offers up their secret handshake, which draws the first smile Peter's worn all morning. They take their lunches to the corner of the cafeteria, and Ned, bless him, holds his head high when Peter's ability to repel eye contact turns out to be contagious.

"They'll get over it," he says as they take their seats. "You're just the rumor of the week. Wait until someone rips their pants in gym class or gets caught making out in the band hall, they'll forget all about you."

"Maybe." Peter glances over his shoulder, and the mousy sophomore behind him spills her milk she jumps so hard. "This is weird, though. I'm used to *being* the punching bag. Now everyone is acting like I'm gonna beat them up for their lunch money."

"And that's a bad thing?" Ned is rummaging in his backpack. "You're the closest thing to a badass this school has ever seen. Own it, my man. Aha!"

He emerges from his bag with a fistful of pamphlets, which he shoves at Peter.

Peter plucks one off the top. It has a technicolor picture of a Dalek and Peter reads aloud,

"*Robotics Club: Exterminate the competition at this year's regionals.*" He raises an eyebrow at Ned. "Is this how I own my badassery?"

"In fact, it is. Remember how I'm definitely the best friend and possibly the greatest human being you've ever known? These are all of the after school activities my mom is making me take. I thought, since you, you know, love me so very much, you might make this very extensive list of extracurriculars more bearable by possibly picking one or two that you could—"

"Yeah, dude, I'm in," says Peter, unhesitating. "For all of it."

"For real?" Ned, who was clearly gearing up for more of a fight, practically sags with relief. "Oh, my god, you have no idea how much better band practice is going to be with you there. My mom is making me play the tuba. The *tuba*, Peter, like I'm not enough of a—are you okay?"

Peter has gone still. In shuffling through the pamphlets, he's just come across one for an after-school literacy program, wherein the older kids apparently walk down to the elementary school to read with fourth graders. *Where the Red Fern Grows* features prominently on the front.

"Um," says Ned, "you don't have to do *all* of them, Peter. If reading isn't your thing—"

“No, I want to.”

I don't want to be home all the time.

(And why is that? Think, Peter. Why is that?)

Because something is wrong with me.

“Okay... are you sure you're okay?”

Peter runs a hand over the pamphlets, fidgets. Now he is the one avoiding Ned's eye.

“Do you think Ben would have... do you think he'd like Skip?”

“Oh. Oh, um. Why do you ask? Has he—has he been treating you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, he's been great. Like, really, really nice. I guess I just... it weirds me out a little. Like maybe he's being too nice. I guess I just feel like I don't deserve it. Or something.”

“Peter.” Ned tugs the pamphlet out of Peter's hand, forcing him to look up. “You've been through so much, dude. Like, a genuinely crazy amount of crap. I think it... makes sense you'd be a little, uh, criss-crossed. But people are *supposed* to be nice to you. You know that, right?”

Peter smiles. It's an effort, but once it's on his face it comes easier.

“Thanks Ned,” he says.

Ned relaxes. He smiles back. “Of course. You know I've always got you, man. Now if you're done being morose, please let me tell you about the decathlon team captain. That is one club you're going to *thank* me for.”

Slowly, Peter's life begins to come back together. He joins band and robotics club and mathletes and decathlon (and immediately develops a raging crush on the captain, Liz, just as Ned predicted). After he turns in a few homework assignments, most of his teachers forget their initial wariness and stop watching him out of the corners of their eyes when they think he won't notice. It takes a little longer for the students, but after a month has gone by and Peter hasn't pulled a shiv on anyone, they start to lose interest. After six weeks everyone except Flash treats him like any other lowly freshman, and Peter can't bring himself to care too much about that, as Flash has always treated him like dirt.

He's busy. He's excelling at school. He has Ned. It's almost like it was before, except that the negative space left in Ben's absence seems just a little deeper now, surrounded as he is by reminders of the life he used to have with his uncle. Deeper, but not sharper. Just as with his parents, the edge of grief is beginning to wear off.

Things at the apartment have calmed down too. Since that first nightmare, Lily has slept soundly through the night, and as the weeks wear on, Peter becomes more and more convinced that his initial wariness about Skip was just a product of some weird reaction to the circumstances in which he came to live with him. Besides a few uncomfortable hugs, a few lingering stares, Skip is the definition of the perfect parent—attentive, sympathetic, available. He won't ever be Ben, but

Peter's appreciation for Skip grows every time he sees a packed lunch waiting for him on the counter, or a text on his phone, letting him know not to stay out too late, letting him know he's missed.

Peter loves the girls. He loves them almost as much as he loved Ben, loves them so much it scares him a little. They love him right back: Lily, vivacious as ever; Emma, quieter, but warming to him a little more each day. They both kiss him on the cheek before bed each night, now.

Just as with his grief for Ben, Peter's skittishness starts to wear off. He sleeps better. He doesn't steal food as much—only when he's stressed about a test, and once before his first decathlon meet, but otherwise his little pile stagnates. The ghoul on his shoulder has even receded, its little whispered warnings growing quieter and quieter until Peter almost doesn't hear them at all anymore.

He starts to believe, once again, that everything is going to be okay.

Which is, of course, when everything falls apart.

Peter gets home late that evening. It's Friday, and Liz had kept them late at practice to prepare for regionals, which are next weekend. Skip and the girls have family therapy on Fridays, so Peter takes the train home, expecting to find an empty apartment when he arrives. He's looking forward to having the television to himself—there's only so much *Peppa Pig* a guy can stand—but when he steps through the front door, he's surprised to find Skip on the couch, watching ESPN on mute with a sleeping girl tucked to each side.

Skip makes a shushing sign before Peter can slam the door. Peter catches it; he slips his shoes off before he steps onto the hardwood, then tiptoes closer. Standing over the couch, he can see tear tracks on each of the girls' faces.

"Tough session," Skip whispers. "We had to cut it short, we've been watching Disney movies all night to get them to calm down. They just fell asleep in the middle of *Moana*. Can you help me get them to bed?"

Peter scoops Emma into his arms, careful not to jostle, while Skip props Lily up on his shoulder. Together they carry them down the hall and place them, fully clothed, in their respective beds. Emma's face scrunches up as Peter sets her down, but she doesn't wake; just rolls over and starts to suck her thumb in her sleep.

He looks up when he senses Skip watching him. Skip nods toward the kitchen.

"Are they gonna be okay?" Peter asks, taking a seat at the dining table while Skip rummages in the fridge. He emerges with a beer, takes a long sip before sitting across from Peter and sighing.

"They'll be fine," he says. "Sometimes therapy is like drawing poison out of a wound; it's painful, but necessary. But damn if I don't hate seeing those girls cry." He takes another swig. "Thanks for your help, Peter. I thought I was going to lose feeling in both my arms before you showed up."

"Oh yeah. I'm just glad they're okay."

"They will be. But how are you? You look a little stressed yourself."

Peter shrugs. “It’s just the meet coming up. Even Mr. Harrington is freaking out, because I guess Midtown always qualifies for state, so it’s like, upholding a legacy. A lot of pressure, I dunno.”

Peter expects Skip to give him the usual spiel about how smart he is, how lucky the decathlon team is to have him—a familiar refrain, by now—but instead, Skip considers Peter for a drawn-out moment, and then slides the beer across the table toward him.

Peter laughs, thinking it must be a corny dad joke, but the laughter fades quickly when he sees the look on Skip’s face: serious, measured. Watching Peter like he’s studying him.

“Try it,” he says. “It tastes better than it smells.”

Peter’s heart starts to beat harder, though he cannot, at first, say why.

“Um, you aren’t serious, are you? Is this—is this some kind of test?”

Now Skip laughs, but there’s no humor in it.

All at once, the ghoul reappears. Its hackles are raised.

“No test, Pete. First beer is a big milestone in a young man’s life, and I think you’ve proven you’re mature enough to handle it. I’d like to be the one to give you your first taste. Go ahead.”

Peter doesn’t want to, but something in the edge of Skip’s voice, in the way he’s continued to look at Peter’s face while they’ve been talking, makes him take the bottle and take a quick, tiny mouthful.

It’s much, much worse than it smells. Peter almost chokes on it—he manages to swallow, but comes up sputtering, coughing and wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

Skip, laughing for real now, takes the beer out of his hand before Peter can spill it.

“Okay, okay,” he says, “maybe not *quite* yet. You really are still a little kid in some ways, aren’t you?”

Peter, whose eyes are already watering, tries not to show how much that stings. Skip has never spoken to him like this before. He doesn’t understand what’s going on.

(No, you don’t understand, do you, because you never listen to me you never—)

Peter gets abruptly to his feet. “I have to brush my teeth,” he says.

Skip leans back in his chair, taking another sip of the beer.

“Of course,” he says. “You sleep well, Peter.”

Peter almost trips over himself as he heads to his room, heart pounding, the little voice shrieking in his ear.

Just like the night of the hug, it takes Peter a long time to fall asleep.

Just like the night of the hug, he is woken by a high-pitched sound. But this time it is not Lily screaming, woken by a nightmare. It is the sound of his door, hinges creaking as it opens.

Peter sits up, but doesn't get out of bed. Someone is standing in the doorway, silhouetted against the dim light shining in from the hallway. For just a second, Peter thinks he must be having a nightmare, because this figure seems too large to be a man, and it is swaying slightly, like it's having trouble keeping his feet.

Then Skip staggers out of the glare and into Peter's bedroom.

But this isn't Skip as Peter has ever seen him. Even in the darkness Peter can see that his eyes are out of focus, can smell the tidal wave of grain alcohol that is his breath. Skip is not just tipsy this time—he is stone-cold drunk.

Before Peter can say anything, Skip crosses the rest of the distance between them and sits on the edge of his bed.

Peter flinches away. There is a siren in his head, and it is wailing (*too close, too close, too close*), but he is paralyzed. He doesn't even think to stand up.

"Skip?" he whispers. "Is everything okay?"

Skip lists from side to side slightly, trying to catch Peter in the cross-hairs of his vision. When he does, he smirks.

"Look at you," Skip slurs. "Always so concerned about everyone else. Always so *nice*. When you c—when you came to me I thought you would be... so *different*. More like the other boys. They always fought me, you know. Them I had to *teach*. But you. Not you. You're different. You're better."

"Skip," says Peter, his voice growing louder even as he struggles to maintain his whisper, "I think you should go back to bed, I think you had too much—"

And then Skip is on top of him.

It happens so fast Peter doesn't even have time to think about running, or trying to push him off—not that he could if he tried. One second he is sitting up; the next he is sinking into the mattress under the full weight of Skip's body while the older man wraps his arms around him, holds him there. Skip has at least eighty pounds on Peter—he is completely pinned.

Peter's mind goes blank with panic. He can't comprehend what's happening, can't even begin to fathom it—all he knows is that he needs to get away, needs to get this weight off of him so he can take a breath (*too close too close TOO CLOSE*) so he says, "Get off, Skip, please get off me, please, get—"

Skip puts a hand over his mouth.

"Shut up," he whispers. "Don't pretend you don't want this. You've always been... such a nice boy..."

On top of him, Skip starts to move his hips.

Finally, Peter understands.

(Are you happy, Peter?)

(Are you happy?)

(Are you—)

Bad Things

Does he sleep? Or does he just slide into that hallucinogenic middle-space, where dreaming and waking blend? It could be either: there's no difference, that night, between nightmares and reality.

All he knows for sure is that time passes. Maybe he sleeps or maybe he only blinks, but the next time he opens his eyes the sun is up and his lungs are empty.

Peter sits up. He doesn't want to; he wants to never move again. He wants to sink into the floor and disappear, because he has no idea how he is supposed to move forward after what happened last night—

(bad things)

—but he can't. Because as soon as he comes back to consciousness, Peter is bowled over by the worst asthma attack he's had since he was little. It's worse than the wheezing episodes he used to have at Ben's; worse, even, than the attack he had at the Arlingtons. He can only draw in tiny shots of air, barely even a mouthful at a time.

So Peter sits up. He gropes along his bedside table for his inhaler. It isn't there.

There's only one other place it could be, only one other place he keeps it, but as soon as he realizes this, rather than get out of bed, Peter doubles over, closes his eyes, and tries to urge the air into his lungs by force of will.

His inhaler is in his backpack. His backpack is in the entranceway near the living room, where he dropped it last night when he went to help put the girls to bed. If he wants to retrieve it he will have to walk through the kitchen, where he can hear the tinkling sound of the girl's voices mingled with the deeper sound of Skip's.

He can't go out there.

Doubling over doesn't work. Peter stands up. He pounds on his chest, tries to cough. Goes to the window and opens it—sticks his head out, even stares down the long length of the fire escape. He would never make it. The air won't come.

Dizzy, his fingertips tingling, Peter stumbles out of his room.

It's the same scene he's woken up to every morning since he came to live with Skip: the girls at the table, sitting on stacks of cushions to reach their plates. Skip, standing over the stove and still wearing his pajama bottoms as he stirs eggs in the pan. Only this time Peter sees Skip's shoulders tense when he hears Peter come in. Skip doesn't turn around.

Lily, on the other hand, perks up in her seat.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," she says. "You're late, we already ate so much."

Peter can't respond. He's stalled out at the spot where the kitchen tile meets the hardwood, his vision blotting at the edges, his breath coming so thin now it's barely making a sound. He stands there, swaying and clutching his chest, until Lily's face falls.

"Daddy?" she says, uncertain. Then, louder, higher, "Daddy!"

At last Skip turns around. For a second Peter swears there is a hint of disgust in his expression, and then he catches sight of Peter's face—lips blue, cheeks gray—and just like Lily his own face falls.

Skip starts forward and Peter staggers back.

Skip freezes. On his face, unmistakable—an expression of remorse. He doesn't come any closer.

"Where's your inhaler?" he says.

Peter's next breath whistles. He points toward the entranceway.

Skip rushes off in that direction, and as soon as he's out of the kitchen Peter can't hold himself up any longer. He trips back toward the table and collapses into one of the chairs, folded over double, trying to stay calm because he knows panic will only make things worse, but that's the Catch-22 of asthma—not breathing causes panic causes not breathing and on and on—

(and there is a weight on top of you, it's holding you down, and there's a hand on your mouth and breath on your neck and you could have seen this coming because bad things just happen and you should have known you have to take care of yourself Peter you have to)

—and just for a second, Peter wonders if it would be so bad if he *couldn't* take another breath.

If he just... stopped.

There is a hand on his back.

Peter flinches, but it's not Skip. It's Lily. She's gotten out of her chair and is standing next to him, eyes shining with tears, tiny palm on his shoulder. To his left, Emma stands just a little further away, not touching but looking just as terrified as her sister.

Peter takes Lily's hand.

Somehow, he smiles at Emma.

And then Skip is back.

He shoos the girls away. In place of Lily's hand, he gives Peter his inhaler.

His throat is too constricted to allow the first puff of albuterol through, so Peter has to hold it in his mouth, letting it work its way into his lungs slowly, loosening his chest until he can take another puff, this one fuller.

With the first real lungful of air, Peter's eyes start to burn. He forces the tears back—there's no chance he's doing this in front of Skip, and even less of a chance he'll do it in front of the girls—but Skip seems to see it anyway, even as Peter turns his head to avoid Skip's eye.

"Girls," he says softly, "go to your room."

"Is he okay?" says Emma.

"He's gonna be fine. Go to your room, I'll get you when we're done."

Peter's heart begins to jackhammer. He wants to get to his feet, to run for the front door or maybe the fire escape like he tried to earlier, but his legs are still jelly; oxygen is still making its way into his bloodstream. He is struck by the insane urge to beg the girls to stay, but he immediately quells it. They're just kids. They can't protect him. They shouldn't have to.

So instead he sits up as tall as he can manage while still wheezing slightly, and he watches the girls head back to their room, casting little glances over their shoulders at him as they go.

Then he and Skip are alone.

Peter wants to not be here. He wants to be anywhere else. He would even take the Arlington's basement, or the sweltering bottom bunk at the halfway house. But here is where he is, so even though he is still gasping he forces his mouth closed, sets his jaw, and looks Skip in the eye. For a second, Skip just stands over him, gazing down, expression unreadable.

All at once, Skip's face crumples. He follows the motion with his body, collapsing into the chair across from Peter and folding in on himself, his face in his hands, his shoulders heaving.

Peter is stunned. It takes him a moment to realize Skip is crying.

"Oh, God," Skip sobs, "oh, God, Peter, I'm so sorry."

In his chair, Peter freezes. Of the many scenarios that pelted rapid-fire through his brain in the moment between Skip dismissing the girls and dropping into the chair, this was not one of them. His fingers instantly start to feel tingly again, but this time it has nothing to do with lack of oxygen.

When Peter doesn't say anything, Skip lifts his head. His eyes are swollen, his cheeks glistening. The tears are real.

"I'm sick, Peter," he says. "I have a sickness. I've always known it but I've never... God, I've always fought *against* it. Everything I've done in the past ten years... everything I've done my whole *life* has been to make sure I never hurt anyone because of this illness and now... what I did to you last night. I'll never forgive myself, Peter. I'll never—oh, God."

He buries his face again, wracked by another sob.

Peter starts to shake. He feels numb and distant, but he can't tell if it's because of the oxygen returning to his brain or because of what's happening in front of him.

His mouth is dry, but he opens it anyway.

"Why... why did you do that?"

Sniffling, Skip looks up. He shakes his head.

"I don't know," he whispers. "I didn't want to. I didn't mean to. I've always been in control, Peter, you have to believe me, I've always... but with you I just... some monster took over and... it was like I had no say over my own actions. Like I couldn't help myself."

(You're different. You're better.)

Peter swallows. It feels like swallowing sand.

"Then I... I should go. Just send me back, just—"

Peter cuts himself off. At the thought of going back to his social worker and asking for a new home, phantom heat rises on the back of his neck. His stomach feels too small, shrunk and empty.

No one else wants him. It's why he ended up in the halfway house in the first place.

Skip seems to be thinking along the same lines. He shakes his head.

“Peter,” he says hoarsely, “Peter, please. You can’t say anything. What about Ned? What about your school?”

The shaking increases.

“I don’t think—”

“What about the girls, Peter?”

Peter closes his mouth.

“You know what it’s like,” Skip goes on. “You’ve seen how bad the foster system can be. I’m the only one who was ever able to help them, if they get tossed to some... *indifferent* fucking family like they’ve had before, they’re never going to make it. And you know it could happen. Look where they sent you.”

Peter has a flash of a rolled-up magazine. For just a second he imagines someone using it to hit Lily. Or Emma. The idea is so repugnant it makes his stomach lurch.

“The world is such a cruel place,” says Skip. “Such a cruel place. No one wants a bunch of broken kids. The system will chew all of you up and spit you back up, and it doesn’t care, I’ve seen it, it doesn’t. But I do. I do, Peter, I swear.”

For the second time in ten minutes, Skip does something totally unexpected. He slides out of his chair, and he gets on his knees in front of Peter.

Peter wants to flee. He wants, at the very least, to push back, to get out of reach. But Skip takes his hand before Peter can, holds it firmly.

(That shiver...)

“Please forgive me. Please forgive me, Peter. Please don’t ruin everything we’ve built here for one mistake. Think of your future. Think of the girls. Please.”

Peter doesn’t know what to do. He has never seen an adult act like this, never seen a grown man sob and beg on his knees. These tears aren’t like the grief tears Ben sometimes had. They’re frightening, but in a completely different way.

“Are you... gonna do it again?”

Skip shakes his head frantically.

“Never,” he says. “Never, Peter. You have my word.”

(You are allowed to defend yourself, Peter.)

It’s just a whisper. Peter can barely even hear it.

The whisper is wrong. There is no choice here. There are no options. There is only one route, because if Peter is responsible for anything happening to the girls, he will never forgive *himself*.

And was it really so bad? Compared to boiling in the interminable heat and lying in the dark next to the clanking washing machine and listening to Felipe sob and never having anything to eat, was it really so bad? All that happened was that Skip laid on top of him and—

(moved)

—really, compared to everything else—compared to what *could* happen to the girls—is that so bad?

(*Not everything is black and white.*)

Peter has jumped in front of the bullet before. It was the best thing he's ever done. The only thing that's ever really mattered.

He can do it again.

“Okay,” he whispers. “Okay, I forgive you.”

Skip gives a huge, shuddering sigh of relief. He lowers his forehead to the back of Peter's palm.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, “thank you, thank you. It will never happen again, I swear. I swear.”

Peter hopes that Skip is telling the truth. He hopes it so hard his chest aches, even though the air flows freely now, even though he can feel his lungs working as they should.

But if he's honest with himself he knows, even then, that the promise is a lie.

He knows now. He knows Felipe was right, and that bad things just happen and that good things are mirages, created to foster just enough false hope to make you drop your defenses, and that they shouldn't be trusted, no matter what promises are made, no matter what privileges are afforded from keeping his mouth shut. He *knows*—so when, a few weeks after Skip kneels on the floor and begs his forgiveness, he hears the door creak open in the middle of the night, Peter is not surprised at all.

He is dazed when Skip slaps him for trying to push him off. He's hurt when Skip calls him things, terrible things, things that echo in his head for days afterward, no matter how much Skip apologizes, no matter how often he says it will never happen again. He's exhausted, because even on the nights when the door doesn't open he can no longer sleep, the anticipation almost as bad as the event. He's resigned, because things only get worse when he fights back.

Peter is many things, now, but he is never surprised.

Despite Skip's promises to stop, it starts to happen more often. Despite Peter's promise not to tell, he starts to get scared.

Escalation. That's what the books call it. Peter goes to the New York Public Library branch near the apartment after school, too scared to Google anything on his school account, too scared to use the school library for the same reason. *In cases of abuse, the aggressor will tend to increase their displays of power and dominance, either as a means of asserting control or because their self-control is slipping.*

The next time Skip *escalates*, Peter forgets not to fight back.

It starts the same as the other nights. Skip on top of him. Skip's breath in his face, his mouth. Peter holds still, like he always does, closes his eyes and waits for it to be done.

But when Skip's hands grope for the edges of his pajamas, Peter panics.

He shoves the hands away. He shouts, "*Sto—!*"

Then Skip's hands are on his throat.

The bruises around his neck are so bad Skip keeps him home from school for three days, and only sends Peter back when he's had a chance to buy several high-collared shirts, by which time Peter's voice no longer sounds so hoarse.

The limp is harder to hide. Peter tells everyone he sprained his ankle running to catch the bus. No one questions it.

He remembers not to fight the next time. It makes things less painful.

It doesn't make them easier.

When the girls are home, Skip talks to Peter normally. If Ned stops by he jokes and teases, makes them pizza rolls, plays the part of *good dad* so well that sometimes Peter wonders if he's imagining things—but which things, he can't tell. Is this smiling, khaki-wearing, dinner-making Skip the real one? Or is it the one who staggers into Peter's bed at night, smelling like whiskey and old sweat and murmuring nonsense while he presses Peter's body into the bed, his face into the pillows?

Which is the real Peter, for that matter? Is he the Peter who goes to school and band practice and decathlon and smiles when Ned or his teachers ask how he is? Who plays with the girls and does the dishes and his homework and pretends, for all the world, like nothing bad has ever happened to him, pretends so hard that sometimes even he believes it?

(You act like nothing bad has ever happened to me.)

Or is he the smaller Peter? The Peter who lies awake every night until his body aches with tiredness, listening for the creak of the door, the shuffle of bare feet on carpet—and when he hears them holds his breath, holds himself so, so still, as if he can make himself disappear by refusing to move?

More and more, he feels like the second.

He thinks he can't do it anymore.

He thinks of the girls, and he does.

(Responsibility is not a choice.)

Skip doesn't apologize anymore. He doesn't cry. When no one else is around, Skip looks at Peter

with such disdain Peter feels flayed by it, like Skip is seeing everything underneath, like he is seeing the things Peter hates in himself and hating them just as much. Like Peter disgusts him.

This, at least, Peter understands.

Winter arrives, cold and sharp as a shard of glass.

In December, a blizzard closes the school for three days. The week after that is winter break. The ice is so thick by this point that Ned's mother declares it too dangerous for him to leave his apartment, even to visit Peter, and Skip decides to take her lead by proclaiming this a "stay-home break." He buys a host of indoor activities for the girls, asks Peter to help him decorate the apartment for Christmas, and then keeps them all inside for nearly ten days straight.

When Peter gets back to school after New Years, he's so tired he can barely see straight. In third period his English teacher places a pop quiz in front of him and he can't even read it: the letters are a nonsensical jumble.

Peter doesn't have a choice: he turns the quiz in blank, promising himself this is the only time it will happen, promising to get back on track, to hold himself together. He lasts about three hours before he nods off in the back of Algebra II, only to wake to an elbow in his ribs and a raised eyebrow from the teacher.

"No more late-night split-screen marathons," Ned whispers once the teacher has turned back to the projector. "Even I won't be able to get you back in here if you get kicked out because of your *Zelda* addiction."

Peter laughs to cover up the sting in the corners of his eyes, then he turns away on the premise of fishing a pencil out of his bag so he can quickly wipe them.

He pulls himself together.

He can do this.

"So I'm thinking after the field trip we can go to your place to work on the hydraulics. I think if we can increase the pressure we can make the movement look more fluid, but—"

"What?"

Peter has been picking at his hot dog for the past fifteen minutes, staring past Ned's shoulder at the plane of unbroken gray beyond the cafeteria's broad windows. February is shaping up to be less snowy than its preceding months, but no less frigid. There have been a lot of afternoons spent indoors lately. A lot of *family time*.

He hasn't heard a word Ned's said.

When Peter forces himself to tear his eyes away from the gray and look at Ned, Ned rolls his eyes.

“The robotics project,” he says. “We have to start getting off our asses, Peter, the competition is in three weeks. And to be honest, dude, I feel like we could have been done by now if you had your head in the game. What has been up with you? Even Liz is starting to notice something is off, she said your flashcards were ‘passable’ last week, which for you is like... being held back a grade, or something.”

When Peter says nothing, Ned waves a hand in front of his face. Peter manages not to jump—*too close too close*—but only just.

“What? I mean, sorry, I’m just—what?”

Now Ned frowns, still looking irritated but with a touch of concern, too. He glances at the decimated hot dog.

“Woah, I was joking, man, but are you okay for real? Are you sick?”

He leans across the table like he’s about to feel Peter’s forehead, and this time Peter does jerk out of the way.

“I’m fine,” he snaps. Swallows. “What—what were you saying about the robot?”

“Okay.” Ned lowers himself back into his seat. “Um, I was saying we can go to your place after the OsCorp field trip and—”

“No.”

The word leaves Peter’s mouth so sharply he doesn’t feel it passing his tongue, doesn’t realize he said it until he sees the expression on Ned’s face, almost like Peter just slapped him.

“Okay... I just—”

Suddenly, without warning, Peter is shouting.

“You just *what*, Ned? Maybe it never occurred to you, but I don’t always like having a million people at my apartment, how about that? And yet every time we have a project to do, we end up at my place, and I have to deal with telling Skip you’re coming, and cleaning up afterward, and pretending I don’t have a million other things to deal with just because *your* mom sucks! This might be news to you, but it’s not my fault and it’s *not my problem!*”

Peter doesn’t remember standing up, but somehow he is on his feet and his tray is upside-down, bits of hot dog sprayed across the table. Ned, still in his seat, is looking at Peter like he’s never seen him before.

Half the lunch room is staring at them.

“Oh no, Leeds, your boyfriend doesn’t wanna play house anymore!” shouts Flash.

The jeer snaps Peter out of it. He jolts, sees there’s a teacher picking her way through the now-laughing crowd toward them, and he snatches his bag from the bench, shouldering past the surly girl from decathlon in his haste to get away.

He spends seventh period in the bathroom, sitting in the corner of the accessible stall and staring at his phone, hoping Ned will text to ask where he is. If Ned texts, Peter can apologize.

The screen stays blank.

Peter can't face robotics club. He can't face an angry Ned, or the whispers of the kids who witnessed his blowup, or pretend to care about hydraulics or... any of it.

He plans to slip out of the bathroom when the bell rings, lose himself in the crowd of students heading to eighth period and climb the fence by the football field, where no one is ever watching. Then he can go to the park, or wander around the bodegas in his neighborhood—anything to kill the time before Skip is expecting him home. But his plan falls flat when, upon exiting the bathroom, he nearly walks into a stone-faced Morita.

The principal crooks a finger at him and heads toward his office without a word.

Peter can't even find the energy to be worried. He just follows.

"I've given you a lot of leeway, Mr. Parker. I know you've been through some real hardship, and transitioning to a new home, a new school—that's never easy. But I did make it clear when I admitted you that your attendance here was contingent upon your performance. Especially when it comes to behavior."

Peter stares at his knees. The urge to jiggle them is almost overwhelming, but he holds himself still. Holds his breath. Says nothing.

"Mr. Parker, look at me."

Peter squeezes his eyes shut. Just for a second, so he can try to block out the tiny space of the office, the closed door, the narrow width of the desk separating him from Principal Morita. Then he looks up.

"It was just an argument," he says. "I tried to tell Ned I was sorry."

"According to Mrs. Wilcox it was a pretty serious argument. You want to tell me what it was about?"

Peter shrugs. Shakes his head.

Morita sighs.

"Well, this isn't just about the fight. We need to talk about your grades as well. You had such a strong start, but the last few weeks you've been in a bit of a freefall. I know you missed some school—"

"I was sick. Skip called in."

"The absences were excused, that's true. Where I'm concerned is that it doesn't appear you're putting in the effort to make up for the time you missed. This is a hard program, it requires a lot more focus than what you might find in a public school. If you aren't up for the coursework, there isn't going to be much we can do to—"

Under the numbness, a little glimmer of horror.

“Please don’t kick me out,” Peter says. “I can’t—school is the only thing I—the only place—”

He bites his tongue.

But Morita doesn’t budge. He folds his hands on the desk and peers down at Peter without pity when he says, “If school really means that much, Mr. Parker, then it’s on you to prove it.”

(You have to—)

Peter swallows.

“I think... I think I need help.”

It’s just like shouting at Ned: the words pass his lips before he can recognize or stop them. Once he realizes what he’s said Peter immediately opens his mouth to renege—

(what will happen to the girls?)

—and sees Morita’s expression soften at last.

“We can get you help.”

Peter’s heart does a painful backflip.

“You... you can?”

Is there a way they can help without ruining the girls’ lives? Is there something he missed, some way out he couldn’t see because he’s been too scared and too tired and so convinced he is alone he can’t even think straight?

Maybe it’s like the English quiz. Maybe the letters only look jumbled because his brain is jumbled.

Maybe someone *can* help him.

“Of course,” says Morita. “We have an after-school tutoring program. I’ll set you up with someone on the honor roll, see if we can get you back where you need to be. We don’t *want* to see you fail any more than you do.”

Peter closes his eyes. It takes all his effort not to sway in his seat.

“Okay,” he says.

“Okay,” Morita agrees. “Let’s get you set up for tomorrow after the field trip. But Mr. Parker?”

Peter opens his eyes.

“You should consider this your probation. You have a lot of resources at your disposal. You have your foster dad, and all of your teachers, and even your classmates. We’re all rooting for you. But no one is going to be able to help you unless you help yourself, do you understand?”

Peter understands. It’s the only thing he has understood all along.

He has to take care of himself.

The surly girl from decathlon and chemistry drops into the seat next to him on the bus, her shoulder bumping against his and making him flinch.

“Sorry,” she says, and she fixes him with an even stare that immediately has Peter on edge.

“Um.” Peter shrinks against the window to put as much space between them as he can. “That’s... okay?”

“No,” she says, “I’m not actually sorry. I’m just demonstrating the proper etiquette when you knock into someone. Like you did yesterday. To me.”

“Oh.” Peter casts around for an appropriate response. “I’m... sorry?”

She squints at him. “I’m Michelle,” she says. “And don’t do it again.”

Michelle goes to sit at the back of the bus, alone. Peter feels strangely disappointed as he watches her go.

Three rows in front of him, Ned whips around to face the front as Peter looks at him, his neck going red. Peter knows he heard. But Ned doesn’t turn around again.

There is a short, sharp pain on the back of Peter’s neck.

“Ow!” he says, and when he reaches up something falls to the floor beside him.

The spider scuttles under a shelf full of beakers.

Peter touches the welt the spider left behind and thinks distantly that he should tell someone. Then he imagines, for a second, submitting to any sort of exam. The thought evaporates.

If I’m lucky it was venomous, Peter thinks. Maybe I’ll die in my sleep.

In his head, Peter tries a laugh at his own morbidity. The imaginary laughter rings false. He can’t tell when he’s being ironic anymore, not even to himself.

Peter glances once more at the place the spider disappeared, then jogs to catch up with the rest of the group.

The Third Option (part one)

“Hey Penis, you’re blocking the aisle.”

Peter jolts awake, and for a moment he has no idea where he is or what has woken him: he has no memory of having fallen asleep—only the slightly disorienting sense that comes with waking up from a vivid dream. The details flee as soon as he opens his eyes, but even so Peter clings to it desperately, just for a second. He has a feeling it was about Ben.

It’s no use. The dream is already gone.

Peter looks up. Flash is standing over him, wearing an expression that is one part incredulity, one part disgust. Peter has fallen asleep with his legs sticking into the bus aisle. Peter registers this right away, and yet for a full fifteen seconds he does nothing: just stares at his own legs like he can’t remember why they’re attached to his body, let alone what they’re doing blocking Flash’s path off the bus.

He feels... off.

“Yo, Penis. *Move*.”

And without waiting for Peter to reply, Flash kicks Peter’s legs out of the way and shoulders off the bus.

Peter waits until the last of the other freshmen are gone before he gets to his feet, and even then he does so slowly. His ankle is tingling where Flash kicked him. When he stands, his vision swims. *Everything* swims, in fact: there is a steady, all-over pressure on his skin, his eyes, in his ears, a pressure that Peter associates with being underwater.

Something is *wrong*.

“Last call, kid.”

Peter jumps. The bus driver is staring at him with a look of exasperation to rival Flash’s. He realizes he is standing in the center of the bus, staring at his own hands, and he hurries to exit, tripping over his own feet in his haste.

He has to go home. Yes. He definitely has to go home. Peter’s feet hit the asphalt and he pulls out his phone, wondering if Ben is working, if he’ll be able to pick Peter up or maybe let him take a cab, because Peter feels clammy and nauseous now that he is awake and moving around, and he thinks he might throw up if he has to walk all the way to the subway station.

Then Peter unlocks his phone and sees his background: a photo of him and Lily and Emma, making pancakes on a Saturday morning. The photo was taken months ago. When he first went to live with Skip. He remembers: he lives with Skip now. He lives there because Ben is dead. And if Ben is dead he can’t go home because he is supposed to go to the library for tutoring, tutoring which he needs if he wants to avoid getting kicked out of school. Because if he gets kicked out of school he will have to be home all the time, and that’s not possible because home is where bad things happen, terrible things—

Peter sways. He closes his eyes against the tilting world, and when he opens them he is sitting at a table in the library.

He blinks rapidly. He can't remember how he got there. He shakes his head, trying to remember, but before he can someone slams a book down in front of him, making him jump.

"Hey, loser," says Michelle, dropping into the seat next to him. "Ready to study some literature?"

She opens the heavy book with a *thunk*.

"Um," says Peter, "sorry, what?"

"Points for politeness," says Michelle. "Zero for reading the context clues. I'm your tutor, Parker. We're here to learn."

It takes Peter far too long to realize that she is pointedly raising her eyebrows at the corner of the room, another to work out the movements necessary to look. Every hair on his body feels like it is standing on end, making his skin almost painfully sensitive; he winces as he turns. After blinking a few more times, Peter sees a teacher standing by the science section, pretending to read his book but really watching Peter over the top of it.

His head throbs. He turns back to Michelle, who leans toward him.

"He's here to make sure you don't go full *Girl, Interrupted* on me like you did to Leeds in the cafeteria," she whispers. "Just play along for a minute." She leans back, clears her throat, and starts to read from the book in an overly-loud voice, "*When considering the use of multiple points of view in a narrative, it's important to ask yourself...*"

Michelle's voice warps and fades as Peter starts to shiver. He's too cold, then too hot. Cold and hot and cold and hot and back again. He thinks he might be sick. He needs to go home. Ben is going to be worried if he doesn't—

The sound of the book shutting jolts Peter back to the present. When he looks around again, the teacher is gone. When he turns back, Michelle's face is very close to his.

"Alright," she says, "let's cut the crap. We both know you know this stuff at least as well as I do, if not better, so why did Principal Morita pull me aside yesterday and ask me to do him the 'huge favor' of 'trying to bring you up to speed' in a few classes? *A few*? Liz told me you tested high enough on your standardized round to move up a grade in every subject last semester, and the only reason you didn't is because they didn't want to stunt your emotional growth or whatever. So do you want to tell me what the hell we're doing here?"

Peter opens his mouth to reply—or, he tries. Even his jaw feels heavy, his mouth tacky and dry. Nothing comes out.

But Michelle plows on before he can try again.

"For that matter, what is with the administration treating you like you're two seconds away from firing shots from the bell tower? We all know Flash's rumors are crap. The worst thing I've ever seen you do is throw a hot dog at Ned, and before that all you did was geek out about Star Wars and Legos when you thought no one was listening. You're like, the dorkiest kid at this school. At *this* school. So what's your deal, Peter? What are you hiding?"

Once again Peter tries to answer her. This time he manages a sort of dry croak, but he has the feeling he doesn't get his point across, because the next second he is pitching forward in his chair, the ground rising up to meet him.

"Woah!" Michelle catches him across the chest before he can fall, pushes him back into his seat.

“Are you okay? What are you—? Woah.”

In the course of steadying him, Michelle presses a hand to Peter’s forehead. It’s cool and soft, the first touch in ages and ages that Peter doesn’t flinch away from, and he wishes she would just leave it there forever, but the next minute she pulls away to get a better look at his face.

“Why didn’t you say you had a fever, doofus?” Her voice has no real bite to it. Peter thinks she might sound scared, but it’s a vague notion. Everything is vague—his thoughts distant, his skin tingly. “Come on, you need to go home.”

At last his voice comes unstuck from the back of his throat.

“I’m okay,” he says. “Let’s just talk about, um, characterization.”

“Yeah, no. You need to go lay down. I’ll get Principal Morita—”

She starts to rise, but Peter grabs her sleeve.

“No,” he rasps. “Please. He’ll think I’m ditching. I can’t—it has to look like I’m trying.”

“You are trying,” says Michelle, but she lowers herself into her chair all the same. “Trying to act like a crazy person, apparently. You feel like a furnace, Peter.”

He releases her arm.

“They’ll kick me out.”

Michelle’s expression softens. She glances over her shoulder.

“Okay,” she says. “Okay, I’ll cover for you. If anyone asks I’ll tell them I was frog-marching you through the city to a poetic beat, a-la *Dead Poets’ Society*, okay? Just let me take you home.”

Peter doesn’t remember agreeing. He doesn’t remember leaving the school, or giving Michelle his address. But the next thing he knows he is in the back of a car, a cab or an Uber, maybe, with his head resting on someone’s shoulder. A second after that he is standing outside Skip’s apartment.

Michelle is standing next to him. She has one hand on his elbow, steadying him, and she raises the other to knock on the door, watching him out of the corner of his eye with an unmistakable expression of worry.

Peter can’t think of anything to say to reassure her. His skin feels like it’s on fire. The edges of his vision are going black.

Suddenly, Skip is in front of him.

Peter takes a step back before he can think not to. He glances at Michelle in time to see her frown at Skip, but Skip hasn’t noticed her yet. He scowls at Peter.

“I thought you were staying late at school,” he says. “Did you forget your key?”

Michelle clears her throat.

Peter is barely conscious at this point, but even he can’t miss the dramatic change in Skip’s demeanor as soon as he sees that he and Peter are not alone. The scowl melts from his face, replaced by the mild, polite, parentish expression he used to use with Peter, but now reserves exclusively for company.

“Oh,” he says. “You didn’t tell me you were having a friend over, Pete.”

“I’m just bringing him home,” says Michelle. “Peter’s sick.”

Skip looks at Peter sharply. He presses his hand to Peter’s forehead, like Michelle did in the library, but this time Peter doesn’t lean into it. It takes all of his effort not to stagger back. After what feels like a very long time, Skip removes it.

“Well, I’ll be,” he says. “Come on in, son. Let’s get you to bed.”

He steps aside. Peter can’t think clearly, but he has an animal instinct at the sight of the apartment beyond the threshold—to run, far and fast.

He fights it. Steps inside.

Skip doesn’t invite Michelle in.

“Thanks, uh...?”

“Michelle. I think—”

“Thanks Michelle, but I can take it from here.”

He starts to close the door, but Michelle sticks an arm out, holds it open.

“I think he needs to go to the hospital,” she says. “He seemed really out of it on the way over, I don’t think he’s okay.”

Skip glances at Michelle’s outstretched arm, then back at Peter, who is standing just beyond the entrance, dumbly watching their small confrontation unfold.

When Skip turns back to Michelle, his smile looks pasted on.

“I’m sure I’ve got it covered, sweetheart. Looks like a nasty case of the flu to me, and that usually passes in a few days. Peter will see you at school.”

Reluctantly, it seems, Michelle lowers her arm. She looks at Peter, her expression concerned but with a touch of something that looks, for just a second, like revelation. And then Skip closes the door over her.

“What did I tell you about warning me before you had people over?” he snaps as soon as he locks it. “Ugh. You do look terrible. Go to bed. I’ll bring you something to drink, but you should stay there until your fever breaks, I don’t want you getting the girls sick too.”

Peter doesn’t object. He doesn’t think he could stay upright another minute even if Skip hadn’t dismissed him. He stumbles off down the hall, collapses into his bed, and lets unconsciousness take him completely.

He sleeps and wakes in intermittent bursts. Waking is painful—all-over pain, pain too big to begin to approach, much less describe—but this has been true for a long time. The difference, tonight, is that he lets the dark take him as it will.

Peter dreams.

“Are you happy, Peter?”

Ben is sitting across from him in a black place, on a dark plane where nothing is solid, not even Peter. He’s wearing his work boots and brown jacket. It’s the outfit he died in.

He looks like he’s been crying.

Peter sits across from him, and a few feet away.

“Hi Ben,” he says softly. “I’ve really, really missed you.”

“I’m sorry,” says Ben. “I wish I had never left.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“It wasn’t yours either, buddy.”

Peter sighs. He closes his eyes.

“I know. Everyone keeps saying that. Well—Ned keeps saying it.” He laughs. It’s a wavering, small sound. “But you know you wouldn’t have been out that night if I hadn’t left. It might not have been my fault, but I did cause it. If I had been better, you’d still be here.”

He opens his eyes. Ben’s are shining. He watches Peter with his mouth half-open, but he doesn’t speak.

“It’s okay,” says Peter. “I’m not saying it to make you sad. It’s better, actually, if I caused it.”

“How’s that?”

“Because... because if it was something I did... well, that’s the only way any of this makes sense. It’s the only way *anything* makes sense. If I’m being punished, I mean. Just... yeah. If I’m being punished.”

Tears spill out of Ben’s eyes. They run down his cheeks, splash onto his jacket, darkening the leather.

“Honey,” he says. “Oh, Peter. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I wish—”

Ben dissolves.

Peter wakes to the sound of the door creaking open. He hears footsteps on the carpet, smells hops and bitter breath on the air. He wants to move, even though he can’t remember why. He wants to run, but he can’t. His body has turned to lead, his skin to ice.

He closes his eyes. When a hand pulls the covers back, he doesn't stir.

"Roll over," says the voice above him.

When Peter does not oblige, the hand grabs his shoulder. Starts to move him. Freezes.

"Peter?" says the voice. "Peter, wake up. *Peter.*"

Time blurs out, disappears.

When it starts up again, Peter is in the bath. He's wearing his clothes, and they are heavy with frigid water. Above him, someone is saying his name over and over.

Peter drifts.

Maybe time passes or maybe none at all, and then he is dry again, and dressed in warm clothes, and that someone is lifting him back into his bed with shaking hands, mumbling something distant and unintelligible while they pull the covers back over him.

Peter hears the footsteps again, but this time they are leaving. He hears them disappear down the hall, hears their owner get unsteadily into his own bed. He wonders, briefly, why he can hear this so clearly, and then he is out once again.

He wakes slowly at first, and then all at once.

He's lying on his back in bed, staring up at the ceiling, which is bleached with late-morning light. He's surrounded by a salt-circle of dried sweat, and someone has put him in his pajamas, even though he's pretty sure he fell asleep in his clothes.

There is a sharp clarity this morning that was absent last night. Peter does what he should have done the moment he started feeling sick: he raises his hand to the back of his neck and finds—

Nothing. No welt, no lump, not even a scab to indicate the spot where the spider bit him.

Peter gets out of bed and goes to the bathroom, and automatically jumps over a puddle of stagnant water before he can slip, kicks a towel out of the way without thinking. The bathroom wasn't this messy last night: this must have happened while he was unconscious. But he files that away for now. Peter he cranes to look at his neck in the mirror, certain there must be a red spot or maybe even a scar—because surely something that could have caused whatever happened to him last night would leave *some* sort of mark?

But Peter doesn't see a mark. He sees the small hairs on the back of his neck, each of them stark against his skin—his skin, which is also dotted with pores the size of needle-tips, and a thin layer of shining sweat, all of these things as clear as if he were viewing them from under a microscope. His skin, which feels... different, under his probing fingers. Smoother, but tougher at the same time.

There are footsteps in the hall.

Just as last night, Peter can hear them long before they are upon him, heavy and shuffling in a manner that means they can only belong to Skip. His heart starts to pound, and he can hear that too,

but more than that he can *feel* it, the *tha-thump* of his anxiety radiating out from his chest to his arms and the back of his neck, making the hair there stand on end.

Something is wrong. Something is wrong with *him*.

It's like the fever stripped away an outer layer of skin he didn't know he had, leaving every part of him sensitive in a way he didn't know was possible... and yet, it's not *painful*. Compared to the fever of last night—hell, compared to the last ten months—Peter actually feels... strong.

Almost powerful.

“Peter.”

Peter looks up as Skip fills the bathroom doorway, but doesn't startle. He knew he was there. He could hear him. He could *feel* him. And as much as he hates being cornered—the bathroom being a particularly small space for Skip to trap him in—for once, he is too preoccupied to feel particularly scared.

Skip, on the other hand, looks terrible. He is still in his pajamas, still smells like last night's alcohol, so strongly Peter has to suppress a gag. Skip's eyes are red-rimmed, like he hasn't slept, and there is a layer of hair on his usually clean-shaven chin. He stares down at Peter from the doorway, shoulders back, and Peter tenses, but the next second Skip sags.

“Oh, my God,” he says. “Oh, thank God. You're alright.”

He holds his arms out, like he means to embrace Peter, but, somehow, Peter is already out of his reach. He sidesteps the hug, slides around Skip, and steps into his bedroom, all in one fluid movement, so quickly Skip staggers when he realizes the air in front of him is empty.

When he turns around, he looks as confused as Peter feels.

Skip blinks, but recovers quickly.

“Are you... feeling okay?” he asks.

“I feel fine,” says Peter.

“You seemed... you were really sick last night. Your fever was...” He rubs a nervous hand across his mouth, and even from a distance Peter can see that it's shaking. “I put you in the bath. I got your temperature down eventually, but I thought... God, Peter, I'm just so glad you're okay.”

He starts forward again, but once more Peter steps out of reach before he can get close.

“Why didn't you take me to the hospital?” he says.

(Because he doesn't care if you live or die.)

Skip freezes. The relief and concern painted across his face are invaded by a twitch, so small Peter can't believe he caught it, but which he nevertheless immediately recognizes as anger.

Then it's gone.

“You know why I couldn't.”

Peter's hand automatically leaps to his wrist, which has played host to a ring of dull bruises almost constantly for the last few months. But when he grabs it there is no tenderness. When he glances

down at it, there are no bruises. Even stranger—the scar from Felipe’s knife is gone.

Peter’s entire body starts to tingle.

“I have to go to school,” he says.

“What? No, you’re staying home today. Do you have any idea what I went through last night? You’re—”

“I want to go,” Peter says, yanking the sleeve of his pajama shirt down over his hand as he looks up. “It was probably just a—a twenty-four hour flu. I should go to school. I need to keep my grades up.”

Skip is staring at Peter like he’s some sort of hallucination. Peter knows why: he’s never defied Skip before.

Peter wavers, but instead of acquiescing, like instinct instructs, he doubles down.

“School,” he says. “I should definitely go to school. It’s fine, and besides, Principal Morita is going to be suspicious if I miss any more. I’m okay, really. I should just go.”

Peter thinks its the bit about Principal Morita that does it. Skip still looks doubtful, and a little suspicious, but after a moment he nods.

“Bea took the girls already. I’ll drive you.”

Skip watches Peter out of the corner of his eye as he walks out of the room.

As soon as he is gone, Peter leaps for his closet. He grabs the first clothes he can find, and runs to the bathroom to change, moving so fast as he discards his pajamas and yanks on his jeans he almost doesn’t catch sight of his own reflection—and wouldn’t, if it weren’t for the fact that his shirt becomes tangled as he pulls it over his head, forcing him to look up to try to find the sleeves in the mirrors.

Peter’s stomach drops. If he doubted any of the other signs that something majorly strange is happening, there’s no denying this one: somehow, overnight, Peter has grown a thick layer of muscle all over his torso and arms. He even has abs.

Abs. *He* has *abs*.

Peter could easily spend the next lifetime marvelling at *whatever the hell happened to give him a six pack overnight*, but in the other room he can hear Skip putting his pants on, fumbling around for his shoes. Peter shakes himself. He finishes dressing, sneaks into the hall, and pauses just long enough on the threshold to grab his backpack before slipping out the front door.

He makes it six blocks before he realizes he left without putting on his glasses. He was too distracted by the sounds of the city, which stretch on for miles and miles, out past the harbor and the Hudson, each one as clear and as comprehensible as if they were being piped directly into his ears. Once he notices the missing spectacles, he also notices that he no longer needs them. He can see the dirt under strangers’ nails from a block away. He can see the crystals in his breath as it

turns to ice on the frigid air.

Still he walks on, briskly and without pause, until he is inside the school's front doors. He's a few hours late; the rest of the students are in fourth period, so he has the hallway to himself. Only then does Peter pause long enough to stare down at his hands, at the spot where his scar used to be, at the places where his wrists were, last night, peppered with bruises—these places that are now pale and smooth and thrumming with muscle that was not there a day ago.

“What’s happening to me?” he whispers.

For once, nothing replies.

Peter makes it through one class—English—listening to every breath, every gurgle of his classmates’ stomachs, the snuffle of every running nose, turning his head every time someone shifts in the corner of his vision, wincing every time the teacher drags the marker across the whiteboard, and then he decides it’s time to get out. He’s starting to panic, needs to think, and he’s not going to be able to do that with this many people around.

He should just go—leap over the fence like he had planned the day of the hot-dog blowout—but he wants to grab his genetics book from his locker, and the pit stop ends up costing him. When he slams the locker door behind him after snatching the book, he turns around to find himself face-to-face with a scowling Michelle Jones.

“Hi,” she says. “And also, what the hell?”

Her voice is mild. Her grip, when she takes him by the wrist and drags him into the drinking fountain nook by the girls’ restroom, is not.

“What the hell?” she says again when she has him cornered. “What happened to you last night? I thought you were dead when you didn’t show up for class this morning, Ned said he didn’t know where you were—how did you go from looking like an extra in a bad zombie flick to walking around here all rosy-cheeked and doe-eyed less than eighteen hours later? Are you even human, Parker?”

“I’m... actually not sure.”

The truth tastes foreign on Peter’s tongue. He looks over Michelle’s shoulder and see that Ned is standing still amongst the crowd, watching them, but Ned drops his gaze and hurries away as soon as Peter spots him. Peter’s stomach drops: if there was one person he *might* talk to about whatever the hell is going on, it would be Ned. But since Ned clearly still isn’t speaking to him, he needs to get out of here.

He returns his focus to Michelle.

“Um,” he says. “I’m really sorry I worried you last night, I must have eaten something bad at lunch. I’m all better now, so—”

He tries to move around her. Michelle is quicker than Skip. She steps in his path.

“That was *not* food poisoning,” she says. “You felt like you were having a reactor meltdown, I

thought you were going to burst into flames. And what was up with your stepdad? I thought it wasn't possible for you to look any worse, but that was before I saw the look on your face when he opened the door."

Peter's mouth goes dry. His focus snaps inward. He's suddenly aware of how close Michelle is standing.

"Skip's not my stepdad," he says. "He's my foster parent."

Michelle's scowl falters. He's said the wrong thing, revealed more in the evasion than he would have with a flat-out lie. He backtracks.

"I have to go," he says. "I'm gonna be late—"

"Don't BS me, Parker, I know when something is up. So why don't you—"

Inside Peter's chest, something breaks. It's like there has been a tiny gate within him, and that gate has been holding back a wild, flailing animal—the ghoul—which has been flinging itself against the hinges in a desperate attempt to escape. It came close with Ned—but now it is fully free.

The ghoul rears its head at Michelle. When it speaks, it speaks with Peter's voice.

"Why is it any of your business?" he snaps. "I'm sorry, but didn't you *just* introduce yourself to me, like, yesterday? So why do you care so much all of a sudden? And why are you following me around like you're obsessed with me?"

Michelle steps back, hurt clearly written across her face even as she tries to fight it back, to keep her careful, neutral expression.

"I'm not obsessed with you," she says. "I'm just very observant."

Underneath, Peter can already feel shame beginning to bubble. But the ghoul is still in control, because Michelle hasn't given him enough space. She still has him cornered.

"Well, go observe someone else," he says. "I told you I'm fine, so leave me alone."

Finally, Michelle makes enough room for Peter to hurtle past her.

This time, Peter makes it to the fence. Climbing it takes no effort at all—in fact, he nearly floats to the other side.

When he lands on the other side—gracefully, lightly, like he weighs nothing at all—Peter finally allows himself to think the word that has been clamoring for space in his mind since he woke up this morning, but which he has been too scared, up until then, to allow:

Superpowers.

Heart hammering, mind racing, Peter casts one last glance at the school.

And he disappears into the city.

The Third Option (part two)

Peter walks, directionless, for what feels like almost no time at all. It must be a while, though, because by the time he stops he is in the warehouse district by the river, dozens of blocks away from the school. Instinct must have carried him there; there are at least half a dozen abandoned buildings on this side of town, any one of which will be a decent place to be alone. It's freezing out, and he doubts the long-defunct buildings will be any better, but Peter doesn't care: he picks one at random and heads for the top floor, only noticing when he is halfway up the rickety, rotting stairs that he is jumping over weak spots and protruding nails almost without thought, like he can tell they're there without looking.

Still the words *too good to be true* are ringing in his head like a claxon as he reaches a storeroom on the third level and, upon trying the knob, finds it locked. They remain even when, noting the rusty padlock, Peter decides to give it a tug, thinking maybe he can force it and—

The padlock breaks off in his hand, as easily as if it were made of eggshell instead of iron.

He looks down as he unfurls his fingers. They almost seem stuck to the lock. When he opens them fully, he sees he's left finger-shaped dents in the metal.

Peter drops it.

"Holy shit," he says. "Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit."

He repeats this mantra over and over as he walks into the storeroom and starts to pace.

Superpowers. It has to be—right? There's no other explanation, and no other way to describe everything that has happened to him since he woke up, but even still Peter can't quite believe it. There have never been two concepts further apart in his mind than undersized, sickly, nerdy Peter Parker and the ability to heal overnight, or hear conversations unfolding from a mile away.

And yet the proof is on his hand, no longer blemished by Felipe's knife. It's in his eyes, which are tracking and cataloguing features of his surroundings he would never have even thought to notice before now: the particles of dust in the air, the traces of mouse hair in one corner, the spot near the center of the room where the floor has nearly rotted through... It's in his ears, which can not only hear the traffic trawling through the city miles away, but also seem to impart an innate sense of *where* that trawling is happening. He can tell the difference between a car horn that is outside this warehouse and one that is being pressed in Midtown—doesn't even have to think about it, just *knows*.

So, okay. He has superpowers.

Though he tries to suppress it—*too good to be true*—a smile makes its way, slowly, onto Peter's face.

He has superpowers.

Trembling, Peter pulls a notebook out of his backpack. He writes:

Heightened senses

Super hearing

Healing

Super strength?

He includes the question mark on the last, since he's really only thinking it because of how easily he climbed the fence earlier, and the little marks his fingers left on the padlock. The fence could be explained by adrenaline, after all, and the lock was rusty, falling apart already. Super strength—that would be too good to be true... right?

Of course, it *all* seems too good to be true, so incredible he still isn't entirely sure he's not dreaming, or possibly dead (*good things don't happen to Peter Parker*), but if he *isn't* dead then it's very likely he's just getting over-excited in the wake of all the other changes. Super strength would be way, way too much to ask of a universe that has made itself very clear that Peter Parker has gotten on its bad side in the worst way.

Still. He has to be sure, right?

There is a pile of old crates in the corner. Most of them look empty, and all of them are half-rotten, like the floor, but there are a few that contain sacks of cement, turned rock-solid by time and humidity. Peter rubs his hands together before he grabs one, reminding himself not to get his hopes up, and that even if all he can do is see really clearly and hear things from blocks away, that's still more than he had yesterday, that he can still make a difference if he doesn't—

Lifting the bag is like lifting tissue paper.

Peter nearly drops it in surprise, catches it at the last moment. Heart in his throat, Peter stacks it on top of the one underneath, lifts them both. It's just as easy.

"*Holy shit*," he whispers.

Still disbelieving, he holds onto the bags for a solid five minutes, waiting for them to start to feel heavy, waiting for the low, unfamiliar warmth of certainty—that he has *super strength*—to recede. When neither of these things happens, Peter lifts the bags over his head, takes a breath, and throws them as hard as he can.

This turns out to be a bad move. The bags *soar* across the room, crash through the far wall, then through the wall of the adjacent room, then finally crash through the window on the opposite end of the building and tumble to the asphalt of the abandoned parking lot beyond.

Peter yelps, cringes. Crouches down and waits to see if he can hear anyone coming, but the surrounding buildings are mostly abandoned, and the ones that aren't are filled with the sounds of industry, drowning out Peter's small contribution to the chaos.

"Okay," says Peter. "So, definitely super strength. I'll just uh, write that down."

But when he goes to reach for his pen, he sees that a strip of the paper bag tore away as he threw it, and is stuck to his palm. He tries to shake it away. It sticks. Only comes loose when he carefully peels it off with his other hand.

Peter thinks of the padlock, how it seemed to stick to the pads of his fingers for just a second before he dropped it.

He thinks of the spider.

"No way," he says. "No way. No *freaking* way."

Still, he crosses to the wall. He presses his hand to the crumbling brick.

Peter climbs.

It takes at least an hour—an hour spent pacing and climbing the walls and hanging upside-down from the ceiling—before Peter calms down enough to think clearly. He’s been alternating between giddy excitement and pure disbelief all afternoon, so it’s not surprising it takes him a while to really start thinking about the implications of his new powers. But when he does, those implications hit him like a flying bag of hardened cement.

It’s been nearly a year since Ben died. Peter has spent the better part of that year believing that the only good he can do—the only good he is *capable* of—is to jump in front of the bullet so others don’t have to. To take the hit in order to protect someone else—because that is the only way he’s ever been able to help anyone, and since he can’t help himself, helping others is all he’s had.

There is a second option now. If he really has superpowers—and he *does*, that much he is finally allowed to believe—then he doesn’t have to wait for the bullet to emerge from the gun. He doesn’t have to jump in front of anything, because he can intervene before the gun goes off, make a difference before anyone gets hurt.

He can save people. People like Felipe, who have been crushed by a system that thinks they’re worthless. People like Ben, taken away because of one stupid night, one stupid decision.

He might even be able to save himself.

Peter’s heart rises to his throat, and not just because he is dangling by his toes from the dilapidated ceiling. He drops to the ground—lands gracefully, easily—and straightens up, staring at his wrist. Thinking of the bruises that are no longer there.

If he can fling two bags of cement across the length of a building... if he can pull his body up the side of a wall by just his fingertips, and leap over fences like he’s playing hopscotch...

Maybe he can stop Skip, too.

Peter feels suddenly dizzy. He knows it’s not physiological, but he has to sit down anyway, to take a few breaths with his head in his lap while the threads of the plan forming in his mind begin to weave together of their own accord.

One push is all it would take. Just one shove with his newfound strength—not enough to hurt Skip, just enough to let him know that Peter wasn’t the tiny, weak, scared kid he used to be anymore—and Skip would leave him alone. He would have to.

And the girls wouldn’t have to find a new home. Peter wouldn’t have to go back to the halfway house, or drop out of school. He could keep Skip in line, keep them all safe, stop going to bed scared and miserable and exhausted every single night, worried about what would happen to Emma and Lily if he didn’t keep his mouth shut.

Maybe—maybe, maybe, maybe—things could be better. Not perfect, but okay. Bearable.

And all it would take is one push.

The sound of his phone chiming makes Peter jump so hard he nearly ends up on the ceiling again. He's barely noticed the cold, seeing as he's been running all over every surface of the room since late morning, but when he picks up his phone his fingers are starting to go numb again; he fumbles for a second before he can unlock it.

Skip: *School called to say you missed class. I'm not angry just worried. I'm sorry, Peter. The girls are worried about you too. Please come home.*

Peter stares at the message for a long time, wondering how he could have ever bought into Skip's phony remorse before, how he could have even *wanted* to believe it even when he didn't really believe it. It seems stupidly clear now that Skip is not sorry, was never sorry—he just doesn't want to arouse suspicion. It's the same reason he didn't take Peter to the hospital last night.

Skip doesn't care about Peter, but for once this knowledge doesn't hurt. Because finally, finally, it doesn't matter. Peter doesn't have to put up with it.

He has another option, and he's going to take it.

Peter: *Srry to worry u. Needed some air, but I'm okay. Omw home now.*

Peter does not, however, go straight home. He intends to—but gets distracted when he passes in front of a thrift shop window, at the center of which, prominently displayed, is a red-and-blue jumpsuit.

He knows it's ridiculous. Red and blue against a city backdrop will make him stand out like a tropical bird, is about as far from *subtle* as he could possibly get. And if he's really going to do what he's thinking of doing—

(Responsibility is not a choice)

—he could probably do with some stealth.

But next to the reasonable part of Peter telling him it's silly, a counterpoint arises, the sentiment as foreign to Peter as the little flame of determination that accompanies it: *maybe he doesn't want to keep hiding.*

Whatever he is—whatever he's becoming—that something isn't invisible. It doesn't have to be. Not anymore.

Besides, Peter thinks as he ducks into the thrift shop, red and blue are superhero colors.

When Peter gets home that night, Skip is full of watery-eyed apologies. He shouldn't have dismissed Peter when he said he was sick. He shouldn't have sent Peter to school. He's so sorry Peter has been so worn down, so sorry for the pressure he's put on him. It will never happen again. Never. That's a promise.

Peter accepts the apology quietly. He promises not to ditch any more school. He eats his dinner, watches TV with the girls, and then asks to go to bed early, saying he's still tired.

Once he's alone, Peter pulls the suit out of his backpack, lays it out across his bed. The red is stark against his bedspread, and when Peter runs his fingers over it and swears he can feel an electric tingle run up his arm, emanating from the suit. He's sure it's his imagination—it's just fleece and dye, after all—but that doesn't stop giddy excitement from rising in his throat when he thinks of what he can do now. What he *will* do.

There's a permanent marker on Peter's desk. He uses it, normally, for his decathlon flashcards. This evening he takes it to the front of the red sweatshirt vest, where he draws a single spider.

Once he's sure it's dry, Peter folds the suit carefully, and brings it to his closet. Inside the hidden compartment is his ever-growing pile of food and the burner cell Ned gave him, months and months ago, and Peter picks the latter up for just a moment. Flips it open and stares at the red ink on the number one. The panic button.

He closes it. Puts it back. Sets the suit on top, and goes to bed.

For once, *elation* is the reason Peter doesn't sleep, rather than terror. Elation and nerves. Elation for the possibilities of tomorrow. Nerves for the possibilities of tonight.

But this is not the night.

His door stays closed.

It stays closed the night after that, too. And the night after that. By the fourth Peter realizes why: he has Skip scared. The fever, ditching school, the call from the principal—Skip is on the ropes, and Peter is the one who put him there.

It's a thrilling position, but a scary one nonetheless: Peter can sleep, finally. His grades on his homework improve. He's not sure if it's the rest or the spider powers, but either way, he can finally *think* again, and so long as that's true he's not concerned about the why. But he still has to be careful. Because if he *does* slip up, the girls are still at risk.

Peter goes to school, therefore. He goes to each class, and even to tutoring afterwards (with a kid he knows from math club, now; Michelle is no longer speaking to him). He keeps working and keeps his mouth shut, just like he did before. Only now, he isn't dogged by exhaustion and worry and the constant, nagging wonder of *How much longer can I do this?*

Because now Peter has Spider-Man.

The first time Peter saves someone is simultaneously the best and scariest moment of his life.

It's afternoon on a Friday, nearly a week after the bite. The girls have therapy; it's the first chance he's had to get away without Skip questioning where he's going in a week. Peter leaves Skip's neighborhood, heads back to the part of Queens he lived in when Ben was alive, climbs a fire escape to the top of the highest building he can find (wall crawling still makes him nervous—he's been practicing, in odd moments behind the school and in his bedroom when Skip isn't home, so it's not fear that he'll fall; more fear that someone will spot a kid in a sweatsuit scaling the side of a building with no ropes and, like, start trying to blast him out of the air or something) and sits on the edge of the roof to listen.

It takes just twenty minutes before he hears it: there is a scuffle happening in an alley three blocks away, two men against one woman. They sound menacing; she sounds scared.

Peter climbs down the fire escape. He pauses for just a second at the bottom— *this is insane!*—but the thought isn't a self-reprimand. It's exhilaration. It's freedom.

Running to the fight, however, is *not* freeing. It takes far too long; by the time Peter gets there, the muggers have already taken the woman's purse and are running for a car that is idling on the side of the road. Peter only just manages to get between them and the vehicle by taking a running leap, nearly knocking off the side-view mirror as he skids to a halt.

"Hey!" he shouts. "You shouldn't steal stuff, it's bad!"

The two muggers look him up and down and burst out laughing.

They stop abruptly when Peter sweeps the legs out from under them. It's almost too easy—until Peter reaches for the stolen purse.

As soon as he takes his immediate focus off the two muggers, several things happen at once:

First, the car behind him kicks into gear and starts to peel off. At the same time, the first mugger lurches to his feet, fists up, ready to lunge at Peter. But even though Peter sees both of these things clearly, almost *senses* them before they happen, his focus is swallowed, all at once, by the third man, who has just pulled a gun out of his jacket pocket.

The gun turns a screaming scarlet in his vision, and he lurches forward almost without thinking, kicking it out of the mugger's hand. The gun goes flying, but because Peter's senses are so honed-in on the most immediate danger, he doesn't have time to block the second mugger's tackle—it catches him off balance, knocks him backward into the now-moving car.

He feels a layer of skin leave the back of his arm as the car leaves the alleyway, but catches himself before he falls. He blocks the next punch, ducks another, and then, for a second time, sweeps the muggers' legs out from under them.

This time when they stand up, they both take off running. They leave the purse behind.

"Hey!" Peter shouts after them. "Bad guys! You have to go to jail now, that's how this works!"

But apparently the bad guys disagree.

"Holy shit," says a voice behind him, making him jump. When he turns, the woman whose purse he is holding comes shuffling out of the alleyway, looking shaken but otherwise unharmed. "Holy shit," she says again. "You just kicked those guys' asses, kid! What the fuck? How old are you? Twelve?"

It doesn't quite ruin the *holy-hell-I-just-fought-off-two-armed-muggers-using-my-bare-hands* feeling of the moment, but it does set Peter to thinking about his suit's features—or, more accurately, the lack thereof.

By the time he arrives home that night, the scrape on the back of his arm is gone. Peter takes a moment to wonder over this in the mirror (he has been wondering at himself in the mirror a lot lately, a stark change from two weeks ago, when he could hardly stand to be in the same room as one, let alone stare at himself in it), and then he pulls his chemistry notebook—now his Spider-Man notebook—out of the hiding space in his closet. He writes:

Mask

Goggles (need to focus—something with blinders/light filters?)

Ropes

Because, he reasons, what good is fighting bad guys if they're only going to get away? He needs something to tie them up. And more than that—he needs a way to get there *before* they're halfway to their getaway car, though this last is more of a conundrum: it's not like Peter can just walk into a car dealership and buy his own private Spider-Mobile.

That one will have to wait, however. He can hear Skip and the girls down in the lobby, about to get on the elevator. He's about to stuff the notebook back in its hiding place—when he is stuck by a sudden, obvious inspiration.

He pulls it back out. Crosses out his last entry, and adds another.

Not ropes. Webs.

“Peter.”

Peter startles and sweeps the half-completed web shooters into his lap immediately, thinking the shop teacher has decided to look up from his crossword puzzle for the first time this semester and has spotted him using school materials for his unsanctioned—and very much secret—project.

But it's only Ned.

Peter immediately feels himself burn red. He does not take the web shooters out of his lap.

“Um,” he says, “hey.”

Ned swallows.

“Hey,” he says.

He looks... he doesn't look like the Ned Peter knows. He looks sad, and a little nervous. It makes Peter nervous, too, but he bites it back. They haven't spoken since the incident in the lunchroom, and even though Peter's stomach twists with longing every time he sees him, he has finally come to understand that the fight was a good thing. He was being stupid in the first place for thinking he could keep his secrets and keep Ned as a friend: he was only putting Ned in the line of fire—his fire, Skip's fire—and as Peter's secrets have grown, so has the danger.

Ned is better off without him.

Peter thought Ned understood this. He thought that was why he has stayed away, why he hasn't texted or said so much as a passing word to Peter in weeks. But apparently today, Ned does not understand.

"I just wanted to..." Ned trails off. Swallows again. Starts over. "Look, man, I don't know if I did something, or if something is going on, but you've been... I mean, I just want to know... Are you okay, dude?"

The back of Peter's throat begins to burn, the back of his eyes along with it.

He forces these sensations away.

Peter sighs.

"Look, Ned," he says. "Maybe... look, maybe we're just too... a lot has happened since... I mean, this last year, a lot has happened and..."

He sees Ned's eyes go shiny and stops abruptly. He thinks Ned is about to cry; instead, he shakes his head and says, in a voice that is a little wobbly but otherwise clear, "So you don't want to be friends anymore."

For one wild moment, Peter wants to tell him everything.

He wants to tell him about Skip—about what happens when the lights go off, about the girls, about how terrified he is that they will be lost and forgotten the way he has been. He wants to tell him about how he still feels responsible for Ben; how everything up until the spider bite has felt like a punishment, and how everything after is a chance—just a chance—to maybe undo some of the bad, to try to bring some balance to the tilted scales of his life.

He wants to tell him about Spider-Man.

(No one is safe with you, Peter. Good things don't just happen, and when they do they don't happen without a price. If you want to do this thing right you have to do it alone.)

"I guess I don't," says Peter.

Now there is no mistaking it: Ned's eyes fill with tears, and he has to blink ferociously in order to stop them from spilling over. Peter sets his jaw, forces himself to hold Ned's gaze until the latter nods, once, and heads back to his own seat.

Only when he is sure Ned is out of earshot does Peter let out a slow, shaky breath, trying to expel some of the guilt that is gnawing painfully at his insides.

Then he pulls out the web shooters, and he gets back to work.

The first time he web-slings is like flying.

He feels like the whole city belongs to him, like he can do anything. He goes through a whole canister of web fluid in one evening, revelling the sensation of falling, of catching himself at the

last moment, of hearing the gasps and screams and whoops of the people below as they spot him. When he finally has to stop he sits on the edge of a rooftop, panting and grinning and shaking, and it takes him a long time to realize there are tears running down his cheeks.

Freedom, he thinks, and he adds his own whoop to the chorus of the night.

And yet, the ghoul lurks.

Even with Spider-Man on his side—even as he adds more and more notches to his tally of thieves and muggers and would-be car accidents, even as his pride over the people he has saved swells—the ghoul never goes away. It's always on his shoulder, even when it's silent, and Peter always knows it is there.

It is waiting for Skip.

He still hasn't bothered Peter again—not since the night of the bite. But Peter can feel his facade slipping the longer Peter stays in line—or at least appears to—can feel the false apologies and fatherly affection giving way to disgust, to lingering touches and ill-concealed stares, just like they did in those first months. For a while Skip was pretending to like him, even—but that, too, is falling away, as evidenced by the sneer on his face one evening when Peter gets home from patrol—AKA the made-up study session he told Skip he was attending—and finds Skip blocking the entrance to his room.

“Did your social worker tell you she was planning to visit?” he demands, before Peter can ask what's wrong, or even set his backpack down.

Peter hates how nerves fill his stomach when Skip sounds like this, hates how he can feel a flush creeping into his neck when he notices Skip's gaze lingering on his too-large t-shirt and oversized jeans. He's been dressing in baggier and baggier clothes since the bite, trying to hide its more obvious effects, and even though Skip hasn't mentioned anything Peter has the sense that it bothers him. Angers him, even.

“Um, no,” says Peter. “She never talks to me. Did she, um, did she come over or something?”

“Why else would I be asking?” Skip snaps. “She dropped by just before I was about to head to the gym, it threw off my entire routine. Said she wanted to ‘look around.’ Have you been talking to her?”

“No. Of course not.” *Spider-Man*, Peter reminds himself, *you're Spider-Man and you don't have to be afraid of him*. “Is she—is she gonna come back when I'm here?”

Skip sighs, dramatic and long-suffering, and moves out of Peter's doorway.

“If she does,” he says, “you'd better warn me next time. You know I hate being caught off-guard.” He plucks at Peter's scruffy flannel as he passes, wrinkles his nose. “Why are you so sweaty all the time? Go take a shower, you stink.”

And he skulks off down the hall toward the kitchen, where the girls are shrieking for him to come make dinner.

Peter lets out a slow breath, willing his hands to stop shaking before he opens his bedroom door, because lately he has a tendency to crush things when he isn't paying attention, or isn't fully in control. When he does manage to enter his bedroom he immediately jumps in the shower, rinses the residue of his most recent knife-dodging dance off, and then drops onto his bed, wanting to gather himself before he pastes on a smile and heads out to the kitchen.

His hand brushes something under his pillow.

Peter extracts the little slip of paper, sits up. It's a business card:

Margaret Esposito

Child Advocate

On the back, Margaret Esposito has written her personal cell phone number, along with a note:
Call me if you need anything :)

At the sight of the smiley face, Peter is filled with a sudden, burning rage.

Call if he needs anything? Where was she when the Arlingtons were smacking him over the head with rolled-up magazines, forcing him to go to school smelling like cat litter, making him sleep under their stairs? Where was she when Ms. Charlise was withholding their food, when Felipe got so hungry he decided he would rather spend his life in jail than spend another minute starving under her rule? Where was she when Skip—?

Before Peter knows what he is doing, he shreds the card.

It's not, anymore, *just* that he has to take care of himself.

It's that finally, Peter actually can.

After the incident with the social worker, Peter's afternoon patrols gain a new element.

He still swings around the city searching for crime, jumping in front of potential car accidents and dropping in on unsuspecting robbers. But now, whenever he has a spare moment, Peter practices.

He practices in back alleys, with garbage cans and discarded furniture. He practices on rooftops, propping his backpack on walls to act as leverage against his metered, careful punches. On each of these objects, he imagines Skip's face. When he punches too hard—when his backpack goes flying, or the garbage bin explodes—he takes a deep breath.

"Okay, Peter," he mutters. "Punching. Normal, human punching. You can do this. You can do this."

All it will take, he reminds himself, is one push. One punch, one strike, and then it will be over. Skip will know he can't mess with him. The girls will be safe. The ghoul will be gone.

He just has to be ready when the time comes.

The time comes in March.

After weeks of silence, weeks of learning to be strong but not too strong, weeks of taking care of others and taking care of himself and anticipating the moment it will all come to a head, learning to control his new strength, preparing to make it known—Peter finally hears the sound of Skip's feet on the carpet in the hall.

The door squeaks on its hinges as it swings open. A strip of faint orange light slices through the dark. Skip's socks shuffle on the carpet as he enters Peter's room, carried on a wave of grain alcohol. After weeks of suppression, it seems Skip has indulged: he is drunk, tonight, not on beer but whiskey, and it's apparent in more than just his breath. He enters the room at a staggering pace, so drunk he can barely hold himself up.

In his bed, Peter tenses. This is it. This is what he's been waiting for, the moment he takes Skip off the ropes and onto the floor. The moment everything finally gets better.

And yet, when Skip stumbles over to sit on Peter's bed—when he sits on the edge, and pulls the sheets off, and gropes at Peter's skin, his back....

Peter holds still. He holds his breath. He waits for it to be over.

When it is over at last—when Skip pulls his clothes on and staggers, wordlessly, out of the room—Peter stays in bed for a long time. He stays still, right where he was when Skip came in. He barely dares to breathe.

When, finally, Peter is able to get out of bed, he does so automatically, mechanically, hardly feeling present in his own body. He dresses, goes to the window. Rakes his hands through his hair and locks onto the ends, tugging so hard he practically rips it out of his scalp.

Why didn't he move?

Why didn't he fight back?

(Because you can't, Peter Parker. Because you were never supposed to defend yourself. Because this is the way things are, the way they are always going to be.)

A sob chokes him. Peter turns away from the window, toward his closet. He hasn't ever gone out this late as Spider-Man, has always been too afraid of being caught, but tonight he has to. He can't stay here, he can't stay in this apartment, this room, knowing that he just laid there and did *nothing* while Skip... even knowing what he could have done, he just *let* him—

Peter yanks the hidden compartment in his closet open, pulls his suit out with such force that a small cascade of chips and cookies come tumbling out with it, gathering in a pile at his feet.

Peter looks down. And he sees the answer he has been ignoring all along.

(You gotta look out for yourself, Pedro.)

Peter has been laboring under a delusion. He has been operating under the belief, for months now,

that there was only one choice available to him: to take what Skip gave him for the sake of the girls. To throw himself on the bullet so others didn't have to.

Spider-Man gave him a second option—or so he thought. He thought he could fight back. But tonight has proven him wrong, proven that no matter how strong or how quick or how prepared he is, he will never, ever be strong enough for this.

He thought this was all he had.

But there is a third option.

It's an option Peter has not even considered because of what happened the last time he took it. One that has been so far from his mind it strikes him as ridiculous when it finally does present itself, both in its obviousness and its simplicity:

Peter can just leave.

He shakes as he pulls on the suit and overturns his backpack on the closet floor. He shakes as he fills the empty space left by his binders and his books with six months worth of pilfered snacks, switching to his duffel when the backpack becomes too full. Atop the snacks he adds a few changes of clothes, the burner phone, his notebook, and the blanket from his bed.

And that is all. All Peter has. All he will need.

There is a third option, and Peter is going to take it.

He opens the window. Hitches his bags over his shoulders, pulls his mask over his face. And leaps into the welcoming night.

End of Part I

The Deal

Part Two

The Deal

“Are you going for a world record, kid, or did Alejandro not explain we don’t pay you by the bag?”

Peter, crouched on the floor beside a rack of off-brand potato chips, grins up at Mr. Delmar, who is standing with his arms crossed at the end of the aisle. Mr. Delmar’s look of exasperation, Peter knows, is mostly for dramatic effect.

“You got a problem with efficiency, old man?”

The corners of Mr. Delmar’s mouth twitch, but he holds his expression.

“If it weren’t for that mouth of yours I’d almost think you weren’t a Queens boy, you little smartass. Does your uncle know you sass your elders like this, huh?”

Peter holds a hand up in a half shrug while the other continues to shove bags on the rack, rapid-fire.

“Seriously, kid, you do know you’re hourly, right? I appreciate the effort, but maybe drag it out a *little*.”

“Yeah, but I got places to be. Things to do.”

“Seems like you’ve always got places to be. Things to do. Isn’t it summer yet? Don’t tell me you’re starting the summer homework already.”

“Nah. School’s boring. I got better things to do.”

“Stay in school, kid. Otherwise you’ll end up like me.”

Finished with his shelf, Peter gets to his feet, and holds his arms open, indicating the cramped bodega where he has worked stocking shelves nearly every morning for the past two and a half months.

“This is great,” he says. “But, like I said, I, uh, I got—”

“Yeah, yeah, you got places to be. You got time for a paycheck before you head off to your mysterious places?”

At the promise of money, Peter manages to stop twitching with restless eagerness as he follows Mr. Delmar to the front desk.

Peter’s paycheck is not a check. It never has been. The shelf-stocking is all under the table, off the books. It’s a job Peter found by pure luck—which did not, at first, seem like luck. Peter used to come to Delmar’s with Uncle Ben, when he still lived in the immediate neighborhood, and when he stumbled in on a particularly cold day at the end of March, he was only thinking it might be nice to warm up somewhere that was familiar, had even spent five precious bucks—taken from his then-dwindling stash of saved allowance—on a toasted sandwich, thinking there was no way Mr. Delmar would recognize him: how could he, when Peter had been a different person the last time he’d set foot in the shop?

But recognize him Mr. Delmar did, and, save for a brief flash of terror at what the recognition might mean—(*can’t go back to Skip, can’t*)—it turned out, for once, that luck was on his side.

“Haven’t seen the Parkers in here in forever,” Mr. Delmar had said. “I was starting to think you’d abandoned me for Sub Haven, you traitors. You tell your uncle to come say hi, yeah?”

And then, hearing Peter’s stammered insistence that their loyalty remained true, Mr. Delmar had given him the sandwich for free.

The realization that his uncle’s death, which had seemed to Peter like the end of the entire world, had not so much as registered for most of the people in that world, was a surreal mix of renewed pain and, even more strangely, relief.

Relief, because when he walked into Delmar’s again a week later, he was able to ask for a job with the addendum *because my uncle could really use some help at home* and watch as Mr. Delmar’s expression shifted from doubt to pity, pity to acquiescence.

Who was going to refuse a job to a fourteen-year-old kid trying to help his only remaining family get by? Not Mr. Delmar, apparently. And besides, it was only half a lie. Peter does need the money to help out at home. That his home is not a *home*, per se, is sort of immaterial. That he no longer has an uncle... well, he has a feeling—a hope, anyway—that Uncle Ben would forgive him this one.

“One hundred fifty bucks,” Mr. Delmar says, counting the bills into Peter’s hands. “And you say hello to your uncle for me. Tell him to swing by sometime. I promise my lips are sealed.”

Peter’s stomach squirms a little bit, just as it always does when Mr. Delmar mentions Ben. But he nods, pockets the cash.

“Same time tomorrow?”

“You know it, kid. Try to have some fun in the meantime, got it?”

The grin finds its way back as Peter exits the shop. He might not have his uncle anymore, or a real home... but fun, at least, is never in short supply.

The abandoned warehouses and factories on the river are a secret that keeps itself. Most New Yorkers know they exist—they are the final vestiges of the industrial powerhouse that was the New York of the early twentieth century, part of the city's history—and that includes the homeless population, among whom Peter has counted himself for nearly three months now. When he came here that first night, having wandered, much like he did the day he got his powers, until the cold got the better of him, he had expected to find encampments, drug dens, all manner of frightening people huddled in the relative shelter of these crumbling storerooms. He had, in fact, braced himself to sneak through the fray, to protect his stash of food and clothes, thinking he would just get out of the early spring winds for the night and then regroup somewhere safer, more secluded.

Instead, he'd found himself alone.

The reason for this became apparent when, upon approaching the first likely-looking hideout, Peter had found a set of chains and a padlock that must have weighed as much as he did and a sign that read *Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted to the Fullest Extent of the Law*.

There were also, upon closer investigation, about two dozen security cameras peppered around the area, which Peter must have missed that first day in his distraction. In another ironic twist, it was the cameras, meant to deter intruders, that tipped Peter off to the relative safety of the buildings. If there was so much security, why had no one come for him the first time? Sure enough, an even closer look revealed that the security cameras were, though numerous, entirely fake.

A broken lock, a trip up a creaky flight of stairs, and Peter found himself in what would become his fourth home since Uncle Ben died.

If he has any say about it, it will be the last.

It is this home to which Peter now heads, having crept out of Delmar's on high alert (Ned sometimes walks to and from school that way: Peter has glimpsed him, once or twice, from between the shelves of snacks and toiletries, and has ducked his head to avoid detection, telling himself the weird tug he felt in his gut each time is just because he rarely eats breakfast before his six am shift). He scales the chain link fence and heads around the back of the building: they replaced the padlock, a few weeks ago, but it hardly matters; a quick glance over his shoulder and then Peter scales the outer wall to the third floor, where he crawls through the window to his "bedroom."

Said bedroom is what Peter suspects was once the foreman's office in this old textile factory.

There is a dilapidated desk in one corner, and rusting filing shelves lining one wall. Since Peter moved in there is now a nest of blankets and pillows under the desk and in the filing cabinets—

Peter yanks a rusty drawer open. There is a pile of ancient paper inside, congealed into a hard lump by fifty years of moisture and smelling strongly of mildew, but the real treasure is underneath: he shifts the paper aside to reveal his backpack.

The backpack holds almost everything that remains of Peter's worldly possessions: in the front pocket, the burner phone, unused but fully charged; in the larger pocket, a mess of crumpled bills, rubber banded together according to denomination.

It is the larger pocket that Peter opens now, extracting this week's pay as he does. With this week's wages, he has nearly a thousand dollars. There was a time not that long ago when a thousand dollars would have been an unthinkable amount of money—the electronics he and Ned could have bought! the games!—but now Peter is extra careful when he extracts a five and three ones from the

pile, rifling a few of the stacks before he zips the bag shut again, as though they might have shrunk in the night.

One hundred and fifty dollars a week. Eight dollars a day for food. If he plays his cards right, he can have enough saved by the time he's eighteen to rent a place of his own, maybe even go back to school eventually.

It's just three years. Three years spent alone, sure—but alone means no Arlingtons, no halfway house... no Skip.

Three years is nothing. Three years is easy.

And in the meantime, Peter has Spider-Man.

The drawer above the money and the phone holds what remains of Peter's stash of food—which is most of it, since he still prefers dipping into his meager budget over reducing his food resources, still gets a tight knot in his stomach when he thinks of running out—and the one above that holds his suit.

His lunch secured, his money tucked away, Peter opens this drawer now. His goggles stare up at him from within, and even though he has seen this same sight every day for almost three months now, it still lights a little flame of excitement in his chest when he looks down at the suit.

"Hey Spider-Man," says Peter. "Let's do this thing."

If someone had told Peter, a year and a half ago, that he would eventually break off his friendship with Ned, drop out of school, and run away from home to live on the streets, he would have easily bet everything he owned that person was wrong.

If that person had gone on to tell him it would be the best decision he ever made, Peter would have laughed in their face.

And yet when Peter swings back into lower Queens some forty-five minutes after he left Delmar's that morning, not as Peter Parker this time but as Spider-Man, he feels the same elation he always feels, the same excitement, the same possibility... he does not, however, feel an ounce of regret.

Sure, the first month was hard. April, when winter hadn't quite melted away and the nights were long and dark and cold—had been, to put it mildly, horrible. But Peter eventually scrounged more blankets from the shelters, along with as some well-worn but warm clothes, and once the days started to lengthen and the nights no longer dropped below freezing, Peter found himself doing something he had not done in over a year: sleeping through the night.

Turns out, sleep does wonders for a guy's mood. And so, apparently, does having free reign over his newfound superpowers.

With nothing left to distract him—no more school, no more Skip—Spider-Man has become Peter's full-time job. Ten weeks have gone by in a whirlwind of car thieves and muggers, cats stuck in trees, tourists snapping pictures, and little old ladies asking for directions to the J train.

Peter has loved every second of it.

When he's stocking shelves at Delmar's or counting his money in the abandoned factory—or even when he is curled up under the desk at night, waiting for sleep and wondering if anyone is looking for him (*is it worse if they are, or if they aren't?*)—at those times he's still Peter Parker. Still fourteen years old, still a runaway, still a truant, and still stomach-churningly aware of what will happen if anyone figures any of this out. But when he puts on the suit...

When he puts on the suit, Peter becomes something else entirely. It's like all the strength that is locked away when he is just himself gets unleashed all at once; all the fear and uncertainty and loneliness just... falls away.

Spider-Man is different. Spider-Man is better. Spider-Man has saved him.

So, no. No regret.

Just freedom.

That's not to say, however, that his time as Spider-Man is always interesting. Sure, he's taken out a few back-alley thugs, dropped in on a drug deal or two, but most days his stats tend to lean more toward the kittens in trees and the old ladies—like, for instance, today.

By the time afternoon rolls around, sticky and hot, Peter has helped a stranded motorist change a tire, helped a frantic woman look for a lost wedding ring, and done backflips for a group of elementary-age kids until he started to feel dizzy—no mean feat, these days. All in all it's not a bad way to spend a morning, but around one pm is when he starts to feel antsy: he's found the best way to make sure he doesn't go over budget on his food is to keep himself on a strict schedule, and lunch isn't scheduled until two. In an ironic twist, Peter's time at the halfway house has served him well on the streets; he can get through pretty much any hunger so long as he knows the hunger has a timeline, an end date. That doesn't mean, however, that he doesn't need an occasional distraction during the wait, preferably something bigger than a lost wedding ring.

His stomach is growling and there is a weird hum in his ears—which might be lingering discombobulation from the backflips but is probably because his blood sugar is dipping—so when, upon clambering to the top of a three-story building after finally disengaging from the demands of the schoolchildren, the back of Peter's neck starts to tingle, he follows the instinct without question.

It takes just a few leaps between rooftops to see where the tingling was leading him: there is an area on the street below where the sidewalk narrows, forcing those few bicyclists too nervous to ride on the streets to dismount. Right at this juncture stands a guy dressed all in black, his hoodie pulled up and his head ducked low.

Now, Peter learned long ago that a hood means very little in terms of a person's criminal activity: he himself has learned the value of a raised hood on the rare occasions when he is in his street clothes during the day: still being somewhat undersized, and with a wardrobe consisting mainly of thrift-store finds that are about four sizes too large on average, Peter tends to draw some curious glances. Hiding his face hides his age. Keeps him safe.

But any doubts about this particular hooded figure's intents are washed away when a young woman on a pink bike draws to a halt beside him and dismounts.

Before the woman can comprehend what's happening—before she is fully off the bike, even—hoodie guy yanks it out from under her. She falls, lands hard on her backside, and the guy takes off just as she starts to scream.

Peter is in the air in a moment, revelling the sensation of falling for a hair of a second before he slings a web and catches himself inches above the ground. The hum in his ears seems to increase as he slings another, but Peter ignores it, his senses honed on the bike thief. The thief turns down an alley, out of the crowd and away from the woman's screams for help and—

Peter lands on the asphalt in front of him.

The hooded thief slams on the brakes too abruptly: he goes flying over the handlebars. Peter flings web to catch him before he hits the ground, yanks him upright, and slings another to bind his ankles together before he can think to run.

There is a moment where the thief's arms windmill almost comically as he tries to keep himself upright. But it's no good: he half falls, half sits on the damp ground, then immediately buries his head in his arms, signalling defeat.

It's not exactly the fight Peter was gearing up for, but it'll do.

"Why do I have the sneaking suspicion this bike isn't yours?" he says. "It's not like a sexist thing, man, but somehow pink just isn't your color."

"Fuck you," says the bike thief into his knees.

"Hey, woah," says Peter. "I'm not the guy knocking ladies off bikes in the middle of the day, dude. I mean for real, I *get* the hostility, but I gotta say I think it's misdirected. I dunno, maybe save it for the cops?"

The humming is getting louder. It seems to be coming from above rather than within, but Peter doesn't have time to investigate, because at the mention of the cops the thief's head snaps up, and Peter's heart sinks.

Underneath the hoodie is not the twenty-something, tattooed criminal Peter was expecting. Instead, a round face stares up at him with wide, shining eyes, cheeks streaked with tears, lower lip trembling. The kid must be about Peter's age. Maybe even a little younger.

Immediately, Peter shoves the bike aside. He crouches down next to the kid, who flinches back.

"Woah, hey, hey, it's okay." Peter holds his hands up. "Look, kid, I'm not gonna hurt you. I'm sorry I knocked you over, I didn't realize you were, um..."

The thief's expression goes hard.

"I'm not a fucking kid," he says.

"Okay. Uh, what's—what's your name, then?"

Defiance is joined on the thief's face by confusion.

"Aren't you gonna throw me to the cops?" he says. "I've heard of you, man, you're one of those justice vigilante freaks, aren't you? So why would you need my name, huh?"

Peter swallows. Glances over his shoulder. The hum is still there, but it seems to be their only companion in the alley; no one on the street saw their brief tussle.

He reaches down, tears the webs off the thief's ankles.

The thief gapes.

“Dude,” Peter says, “do you have any idea what happens to kids who steal bikes? Whatever it is you think you’re doing here, it’s not worth it. It’s really, really not. Go home, man.”

The thief doesn’t need telling twice. He scrambles to his feet and takes off down the alley, nearly gone before Peter has resumed his own feet.

But then, at the mouth of the alley, he pauses. Turns around.

“Mickey,” he says.

“Uh...”

“That’s my name.” A pause. “You’re an okay dude, Spider-Man.”

And Mickey disappears around the corner.

And there it is: that little swell of pride, that enduring warmth. It’s the same warmth he felt the night he saved Felipe, the same warmth he feels every time he really saves someone who needs it—*really* needs it, not just like, needs a favor.

The mask is good for a great many things: one of those is hiding the flush that creeps into Peter’s cheeks as he picks up the stolen bike, and the grin that comes along with it.

By the time he makes it out of the alley, however, the grin has faded: the hum has not disappeared on the rush of adrenaline, like he thought it would have. It doesn’t disappear when he returns the bike to its owner, either, nor when she pulls him into a spine-crushing hug.

“Do you hear that?” he asks her, but she is too busy sobbing into his shoulder to answer.

When Peter finally manages to disentangle himself from her grateful embrace—a little hastily, maybe, but even with time and distance from Skip, he still hasn’t quite gotten to the point where he welcomes hugs from random strangers—he is starting to feel slightly nervous, and a little lightheaded. It’s only one-thirty, but he figures that’s close enough to warrant a street taco or two if it means his head will stop humming: he waves goodbye to the woman and a few onlookers, then launches himself onto the nearest rooftop.

Peter’s intention is to gather himself briefly and then head off to Midtown, where he can grab a bite and hopefully clear his head, but as soon as lands on the gravel flat-top, the hum gets even louder, almost as though it is *approaching* him.

Too late, Peter realizes that the noise isn’t coming from his head.

“Wha—ugh!”

Peter nearly loses his balance trying to spin around and cover his surprise at the same time. He staggers, heart jackhammering, as Iron Man lands with a soft *clunk* on the rooftop beside him.

“I’ll be sure to cross ‘eloquence’ off your list of potential superpowers.” The suit opens. Tony Stark steps out. “Though it’s not the least coherent greeting I’ve ever gotten.”

There is a brief moment where Peter thinks he should maybe run for it, and then all thought is washed away by a static stream of disbelieving reverence in the form of, *That’s Tony Stark. Tony Stark is right in front of me. Tony Freaking Stark is standing three feet away.*

“Uh,” says Peter’s mouth. “Huh—um—”

Tony Freaking Stark raises an eyebrow.

“What—” At last, Peter finds some words, remembering at the last second to drop his voice an octave or two. He coughs. “What are you doing here?”

“And a hearty hello to you too, Webs.”

“I mean. Yes. Hi. Hello. Mr. Stark. I mean. Iron Man. Hi.”

“Yup, definitely nixing eloquence.” Mr. Stark glances around, adjusting the sleeve of his suit jacket and regarding the New York skyline like one might regard a lesser piece of art in a dark corner of the Louvre. “So, are we gonna introduce ourselves, or should I just move right into my commentary on that getup? Because I have a few notes.”

Peter is blessedly relieved that his “getup” covers his violent blush.

“I know who you are,” he says.

“Most people do. It was kinda your name I was looking for.”

Peter says, “I’m not Spider-Man.”

“No one said you were. But ironically, now I’m thinking you *are*. Also, is that the name you’re going with? Spider-Man? Not... Spiderling? Spider-Master? You know, hearing myself I’m remembering why I have a team of people who usually name stuff for me—don’t get me started on BARF—but even so, as a veteran in the hero business, I feel obliged to warn you the first brand tends to stick.”

“I said I’m *not* Spider-Man.”

His brain is slowly catching up to the situation. The hum from the Iron Man suit is the same one he heard when he was apprehending Mickey in the alley below, which means Mr. Stark might have seen him let the kid go. Which means...

Peter has to get out of here.

If Mr. Stark puts the suit back on Peter doesn’t have a chance. But if he can make a quick getaway while the man is out in the open, he might be able to get out of sight before he can re-engage.

Peter takes a step back.

Obligingly, Mr. Stark steps forward.

“Okay, not-Spider-Man,” he says. “How about your real name?”

Another step.

“That’s private. I’m, um, I’m a private citizen, man. I got a right to privacy.”

“Uh-huh. Such a private guy you spend your Wednesday afternoons leaping between buildings in a giant red-and-blue onesie?”

The blush deepens. Peter stumbles on the next step, but Mr. Stark doesn’t seem to notice. He’s still following him.

“It’s, uh, it’s for Comic-Con?”

“Comic-Con,” Mr. Stark deadpans. “On this rooftop. In the middle of June.”

“Is... that what month it is...?” says Peter lamely.

“So,” Mr. Stark says, and Peter stiffens when he reaches into his jacket. But it turns out he’s just reaching for a StarkPhone, which he uses to pull up a hologram of—

Of Peter. Dressed in exactly the same clothes he’s wearing now, leaping in front of an SUV that’s inches away from t-boning a bus.

I’m on YouTube? Peter thinks, but the faint thrill is muted by Mr. Stark’s raised eyebrow.

“That’s *you*, isn’t it?”

Another step.

“That’s—that’s all online, right? I mean, you can do anything with special effects nowadays.”

Peter’s calves jar against the lip of the rooftop. He stops.

Mr. Stark nods at the steep drop at Peter’s back. “You gonna special effect your way out of this one, Spiderling?”

“*Man*,” Peter corrects, then curses himself. “Look, du—sir, I don’t—I don’t want any trouble, so maybe we should just, uh, leave it at that.”

Tony Stark shrugs. Sniffs.

“Okay,” he says, “we can do things the hard way.”

And he shoves Peter off the roof.

Peter falls for less than half a second before instinct kicks in and he slings a web. He barely has time to comprehend what happened before he’s landing on the rooftop, skidding to a halt a few feet away from Mr. Stark’s triumphant smirk.

“*Dude!*” he says. “What if I *wasn’t* Spider-Man?”

“Calculated risk,” says Mr. Stark. “They tend to pay off when you’re me.” He gives Peter a sweeping look. “You look like you could use a sandwich, Spider-Man. And I have a proposition I’d like to discuss with you.”

Did Peter think *getting* superpowers was surreal? Hanging upside-down from a warehouse ceiling *pales* in comparison to sitting in a Brooklyn deli, eating a hoagie underneath his half-raised mask while the world’s most famous billionaire-slash-superhero polishes off a Cuban less than three feet away. To add to this sense of surreality, said billionaire has rented the entire restaurant; besides the shell-shocked-looking kid behind the register, they are completely alone.

Peter sympathizes with the cashier’s wide-eyed gawp. He is so nervous he doesn’t even have to force himself to eat the sandwich—which is the biggest meal he’s had in three days—slowly. Mr. Stark finishes first, therefore, and leans back in his chair with his arms crossed, watching Peter

finish his own with one eyebrow raised over a black eye: the only part of his appearance that is not immaculate.

“You’re really not gonna take the mask off?” he says.

Peter shrugs. “That’s kinda the point of a mask.”

The hoagie has worked his tongue loose. Now he feels more like he does just before a decathlon, the nerves making him bolder.

“Yeah, but we’re partners now,” says Mr. Stark. “Kinda rude not to show your face to the man offering you fame and fortune.”

Peter perks up. “There’s money involved?”

“Woah, cool it there, Wall Street. You haven’t even accepted my offer yet.”

“It’s not really an offer though, is it?” Peter finishes the sandwich, licks his fingers, and wonders for a second if it would be rude to ask for another before deciding that it probably would. “You’re asking for *my* help. And you haven’t even told me what I’d be helping with.”

“I’m Iron Man. When I say, ‘I need your help,’ the ‘to save the world’ is implied.”

Peter raises an eyebrow, remembers Mr. Stark can’t see his face, and crosses his arms over his chest instead.

“Yeesh,” says Mr. Stark, “and here I thought the neighborhood hero of Queens would be amenable to, you know, all kinds of righteous do-goodery. I think I liked you better on the rooftop, when you were too starstruck to stutter my name.”

Peter feels a confusing mix of embarrassment and pride. *I’m standing up to Tony Stark*, he thinks. Then, panicked, *Holy shit, I’m standing up to Tony Stark*.

He uncrosses his arms.

“I’m not saying no,” he says slowly. “But, um... why me? I mean, you’re an Avenger. You have all the other superheroes in the world on speed dial and I...”

“Fight crime in your big-boy jammies?”

Peter scowls and yanks his mask over his mouth. “I work on a budget,” he says.

“Sorry, sorry.” To his credit, Mr. Stark does look sorry. “It’s not *all* lo-fi,” he concedes, nodding to Peter’s web-slingers. “Who manufactures your webs? The tensile strength on those things is insane.”

“I do.”

“And the...?”

He gestures to the goggles.

“Yeah, those too. Ever since—I mean, my powers are kind of... intense, sometimes. They help me filter everything out. Focus.”

Mr. Stark nods, and Peter realizes with a pleasant twist in his stomach that he’s impressed.

“So,” Mr. Stark says, “why?”

Peter falters.

“Uh... I don’t know, I guess I need to be able to... see?”

“Not the goggles, smarty-pants. Why bother with this at all? The crime-fighting, the costume. What’s the motivation?”

The sandwich calcifies in his stomach.

Why? How the hell is he supposed to explain *why* to someone like Tony Stark?

Because the world is such a shitty place that my best efforts as Peter Parker only dug me deeper and deeper, but Spider-Man can’t be buried.

Because I’m terrified of what would happen if I stopped.

Because if I didn’t have this, I wouldn’t have any reason to keep going at all.

But he can’t say that to Iron Man.

And what’s more, it’s not the whole truth. Peter realizes this only when the words start to pour out of him.

“It’s like... I have these powers, right? But before that... I was just, you know, I was just a regular... a regular guy. And when you’re a regular guy, you can do... *things*, to—to help people, but you can only do so much, because you’re just one person. Bad things just... happen. And that’s” — *unbearable* — “okay. But when you can do the things I can do and you *don’t* ... then, when the bad things happen, they happen because of you.”

(“*Responsibility is not a choice.*”)

Mr. Stark looks at him without a trace of humor.

“So you’re looking out for the little guy.”

“Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Just... looking out for the little guy.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

Peter gulps, nods.

“Why’d you let the bike thief go?”

Peter’s fingertips go numb.

(He saw, he saw, he’s going to turn you in, you’re gonna go back to Skip or maybe somewhere worse and you have to get out now get out too close too close too close—)

He forces the ghoul on his shoulder to be quiet.

“I just... I didn’t think” —he swallows another dizzying rush of panic— “I didn’t think the guy’s life should have been ruined because of one mistake. Sometimes... sometimes things aren’t so black and white.”

Mr. Stark sits very still, staring at Peter. Peter forces himself to stare back, even though Mr. Stark can't see his eyes underneath the goggles.

Suddenly, Mr. Stark sits up straight. Peter jumps, has to bite his own tongue to stop from leaping onto the ceiling.

"You ever been to Germany?" says Mr. Stark.

Peter's mouth tastes like ash. "I—what?"

"Germany. Sausages. Beer. Lederhosen. That last one might be Swiss, but you get the point."

"You want... you want me to go to Germany?"

"Uh-huh."

"To save the world."

"That's the end game, yes."

Germany. He's never even been out of New York City. The idea is a match-flame of potential, of excitement.

Peter thinks, *What have I got to lose?*

The ghoul responds, *(Everything, if he figures out who you are.)*

Because the only reason Mr. Stark could possibly be sitting in front of him right now is that he has no idea his recruit is a fourteen-year-old dropout, runaway, and, according to his record, juvenile delinquent.

So Peter does some calculating. Sure, refusing might make Mr. Stark more curious, but Peter's gotten better at sneaking around, and he'd be even more cautious if he knew he was being watched. The proof that he's already done a good job of keeping his secret is right in front of him. He could stay here and stay (relatively) safe from prying questions, keep stopping bike thieves and knocking out purse-snatchers...

Or Peter could go to Germany. He could work with Iron Man, thus fulfilling like, *every* fantasy he's had since his parents took him to the Stark Expo when he was seven.

He could save more than just himself.

"I have... I have one condition."

"I'm actually *not* in the business of paying for samaritanism. Heroes-for-hire are just tacky. But if it's money you're after, maybe we can find a back door. Those web thingies might warrant a September Grant."

For a flash, Peter thinks what it would be like to have the sort of petty cash a Stark scholarship would afford, but it's an idea quickly dropped. He'd need a bank account for one. And to have a bank account, he'd need an identity.

Which is the opposite of what he's after.

He shakes his head.

“Not money,” he says. “If I help you, you have to promise I can keep my mask on. And... you have to swear you won’t try to figure out who I am.”

Mr. Stark leans back.

“Secret identities,” he says, “cause more complications than they solve.”

“No offense, Mr. Stark, but your house got blown up because you *don’t* have a secret identity.”

“Touché. But the complication I was referring to was me, actually. I’m also not in the business of working with strangers.”

The disappointment over a lost opportunity that Peter did not, until twenty minutes ago, know existed, is surprisingly sharp.

Peter gets to his feet.

“Then it was nice to meet you, Mr. Stark, but—”

“Wait. Wait, wait, wait.”

Peter sinks slowly back into his seat.

“You’re serious?” says Mr. Stark. “You’re really gonna turn me down if I try to figure out what’s under the onesie?”

“Yes. And maybe stop calling it a onesie?”

Mr. Stark heaves a sigh that turns into a groan. He buries his face in his hands, then quickly removes them.

“Alright, Spider-Man,” he says. “We have a deal.”

He offers his hand. Peter forces himself to take it, and hopes his unexpected—partner? boss?—doesn’t notice the tiny shudder that runs through him as the flesh exposed by his fingerless gloves meets Mr. Stark’s bare hand.

“One amendment, though.”

Peter jerks his hand back.

“That wasn’t the deal.”

“It doesn’t affect the terms, relax. I have a reputation to protect.” He looks Peter up and down. “If you’re gonna run with me, Spider-Man, you’re gonna look the part.”

The Secret

It takes a long time, after Mr. Stark leaves, for Peter to find his way back to the warehouse. Not just because he's still shaking with adrenaline and disbelief—he is—but because he wants to make sure Mr. Stark sticks to his word and doesn't try to follow him. He wanders for a while, therefore, too jittery to concentrate on crime-fighting but trying nonetheless, and only when he is sure the hum of the Iron Man suit has faded into memory does he make his way back to his makeshift home.

Once there, Peter rips off the mask but doesn't take off the suit. He goes to the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet and takes out the burner phone, turns it on for the first time in months. It takes a few tries with the ancient interface to figure out how to check how many minutes he has available—seriously, how did people in the early 2000s survive?—but once he does he immediately enters the phone number Mr. Stark gave him, written on a napkin (“Oh, we're doing prehistoric now?” Mr. Stark had said as he wrote it down), and sends a text:

Ready for pickup tmrrw at place we discussed. C u there?

There is a moment's pause, during which Peter holds his breath—he's still not totally convinced this afternoon wasn't a weird dream—but then a response pings through:

Got it.

It's a little short, but Mr. Stark's not asking who this is or telling Peter never to contact him again, so Peter counts it as a plus. He snaps the phone shut, changes quickly into jeans and a tatty jacket, then stuffs the phone in one pocket and the mask in the other.

Now to take care of a few things.

Mr. Delmar is first on his list. Peter is nervous—he's never taken a day off before—but when he tells Mr. Delmar he and his uncle are going out of town for a few days, Mr. Delmar just grins and waves him off.

“It's about time I saw you take a break, kiddo. Have fun, the shelves will be waiting for you when you get back.”

Peter thanks him profusely then, on a last-minute whim, stops to buy a fifteen-dollar phone card and a couple of cheap plastic horses on his way out, and has to work furiously to cover the waver in his voice when Mr. Delmar gives them to him for free.

His job secure, his funds untouched, Peter heads to his second destination.

This one is a little more complicated, so he walks slowly, hands in his pockets, hood drawn up, trying to give night some time to fall before he ducks into an alley and pulls the mask on. It's only dusk by then, but it'll have to do; his face covered, Peter makes his way around the back of the apartment building, checks several times to make sure no one is watching, then scales the fire escape to the top floor. The window he's aiming for is cracked slightly: Peter can hear three voices coming from within—two girls and one man—so upon reaching the uppermost landing he mounts the wall, crawls around to the top of the window and hangs upside down so he can peer through it. It's a difficult angle: he can only see the impressions of the people in the room as they move around if he wants to stay high enough to remain unseen, but he can hear them, and after a few minutes the man and one of the girls walk out.

Cautiously, Peter drops back onto the fire escape.

Inside, sitting on the bed and playing quietly with one of her stuffed animals, Emma faces away from the window. Peter waits until the sounds of Lily and Skip making dinner fill the kitchen, and then he taps on the glass.

“Psst.”

Emma turns right away, a small smile on her face, and clutches her stuffed rabbit to her chest as she tiptoes over to the window to open it.

“You aren’t supposed to come tonight,” she says.

“I know.” Peter crouches down so he can rest his chin on the window sill, putting him at Emma’s eye level. “But something happened and I had to come early. Is that okay?”

Emma shrugs one shoulder.

“Daddy’s here tonight.”

Peter suppresses the squeamish feeling that arises at the mention of Skip and forces a smile, even though Emma can’t see him behind the mask.

“Is he being nice to you?”

“You always ask that.”

“I always want to know.”

She shrugs again. “Daddy’s always nice to us.”

“Well, that’s good. Daddies should be nice, you know.”

“I know.” She hesitates. “But I still shouldn’t tell him about you, right?”

This is the part of Peter’s weekly visits he’s still unsure about.

When he first came back to the apartment, about two weeks after he left it, he’d really had no intention of speaking to anyone. Not the girls, and definitely not Skip—hence the mask. Truthfully, if it was just a matter of comfort he never would have come at all: ten weeks gone and he still gets a sick, tight feeling in the pit of his stomach every time he gets close to what used to be his bedroom, still has to force all of his focus on making sure his hands don’t shake whenever he catches a hint of Skip’s voice or his cologne from the fire escape.

But these visits aren’t about comfort. They’re about the fact that no matter how hard he tried, those first couple of weeks, he couldn’t get the girls’ faces out of his head. Couldn’t stop wondering what Skip had told them about his disappearance. Couldn’t stop rolling over all of the *what ifs* crowding each other for space in his brain:

What if Skip was hurting them and hiding it?

What if CPS takes them because I ran away?

What if me being there was the only thing keeping them safe in the first place?

He’d really only intended, that first time, to peek in on them—to get a glimpse and reassure himself

that they were fine, then carry on with setting up his own life as far away from the place as possible. Peter had even picked a night he knew Skip would be out of the house: Thursdays, when Bea helped the girls with their homework while Skip was volunteering with his foster parent group.

But his senses were off that first time, muddled by nerves and uneasiness and doubt, and so when Peter had peered through the window of what he assumed to be the girls' empty bedroom, Emma, alone with her books on the floor, had spotted him almost immediately.

If it had been Lily it would have been a different story. Peter had never known Lily to keep quiet about even the littlest things, and if she had been the one to spot him he would have had to run for it—and, probably, never come back. But Emma hadn't opened her mouth. She had just frowned slightly and stood up, to walk over and open the window just a crack.

"Are you a burglar?" she'd said.

Peter was taken aback. This was an unexpected bold streak, a side of Emma he'd only seen glimpses of, and then only after he'd known her for weeks. The fact that she approached him—dressed in his Spider-Man suit and creeping on her bedroom window, no less—as easily as she did was disconcerting on a number of levels, but Peter didn't have time to think about it in the moment.

"No," he said. "I'm a good guy."

Emma considered this, frowning, while Peter held his breath.

"Are you a superhero?"

Taken aback, Peter said, "Um, I guess so. How did you know?"

"The only good guys who wear masks are superheroes," she said, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world. "So what are you doing here?"

"I'm just... making sure everything is okay," Peter had said. "Is that okay with you?"

Emma nodded.

"So... is everything okay?"

Slowly, Emma shook her head. Peter's stomach had dropped into his feet, until Emma said, "Our brother ran away."

Relief. Relief, and—inspiration.

"Yeah," Peter had said, swallowing. "Yeah, I know. Actually—can you keep a secret?"

Emma nodded again.

"I know him. Your brother. Peter. You can't tell anyone, but he's the one who sent me. He wanted me to make sure you were okay."

"Is he okay?"

Peter nodded. "He's fine. He told me to tell you and Lily he misses you a lot. But you can't tell anyone I talked to you about him, okay? He needs—he just needs to be alone for a while, does that make sense?"

"I guess so."

“Does that—does that make you upset?”

“No,” said Emma calmly. “Sometimes it’s nice to be alone.” She glanced over her shoulder at her toys, her books. “But you can come visit me if you want. I won’t tell anyone.”

And, if the fact that Peter hasn’t been caught—or even spotted, so far as he can tell—in the proceeding weeks are any indication, Emma has been true to her word.

Because Emma is so good at keeping secrets, Peter has been coming back to the apartment once a week. He knows the girls are fine now: there is nothing at all, either in the spying he’s done on his own or the conversations he’s had with Emma, to indicate that Skip has turned his attentions to the girls in the wake of Peter’s disappearance. Apparently, Skip was telling the truth about just one thing: it really *was* only Peter.

Still, Peter returns, faithfully, every Thursday evening. Just to be sure.

And, if he’s honest with himself, he does it because seeing Emma—and Lily, from afar—makes him feel a little bit less lonely. They were his sisters for a while, after all. He still loves them, even if he can’t tell them the truth.

It doesn’t make him feel any better about asking Emma to lie, though. He knows he’s not exactly setting a good example, showing up at her window in a mask, telling her to keep secrets from her dad and her sister. If it weren’t for the fact that Spider-Man seems to be the exception to Emma’s own rule (never trust anyone), he’d really have to reconsider coming here at all.

But for now, Peter allows himself this one thing.

“If that’s okay,” Peter says now. “I really appreciate you keeping my secret. Hey, I brought you something.”

He pulls out the two flimsy horse figurines Mr. Delmar gave him, sets them on the windowsill. Emma picks one up, smiling in that faint, hesitant way she does when she’s pleased but doesn’t want to show it, and turns it over in her hands a few times.

“Those are from Peter,” he says. “The other one is for your sister, but you can’t tell her where you got it, okay? Our secret.”

“Okay,” says Emma. She looks up. “Where are you going?”

“Um,” says Peter, “I met a new friend who needs my help. I’m just gonna be gone a couple of days.”

“A friend like Peter?”

“Kinda.”

“Okay,” says Emma again. “You should tell Peter we miss him.”

Peter’s eyes begin to prickle, so he blinks furiously and waits for the sensation to recede before he speaks.

“Thanks Emma, I’ll tell him. He misses you too. See you next week?”

“Sounds good. Can you do a handstand?”

That gets Peter smiling for real. He obliges, rising on two hands first, then one, then onto a single

finger, eliciting a rare delighted laugh from Emma.

“Emma, dinner!”

At the sound of Skip’s voice from the other room, Peter drops back into a crouch. Emma glances over her shoulder, shouts, “Coming, Daddy!” and turns back to Peter.

“Okay, have fun,” she says. “See you later.”

“You too Emma. Uh—” Halfway to leaping off the fire escape, Peter turns back. “You know you shouldn’t take toys from strangers, right? Only—”

“Only superheroes,” says Emma. “I know.”

And, with a little wave, Emma leaves the room.

One last stop before he can head back to the warehouse, but Peter can’t go right away: it’s still just past dusk, and this one he can only go to under cover of night. His fullness from Mr. Stark’s sandwich has long since dissipated, so he uses his would-be lunch money to buy a carton of pad thai and sits in a corner booth of the tiny restaurant, waiting for darkness and watching the news on the restaurant’s tiny TV. There’s something about a bomb at a peace summit—Peter is aware, sort of laterally, that there is a conflict surrounding the Avengers, but ever since he left his StarkPhone behind at Skip’s, the news has felt as surreal and distant as a fairy tale. Nothing like trying to survive a New York winter on the streets to pull your focus away from the outside world. In fact, besides the muggings and robberies happening on street corners in Queens, Peter hasn’t really kept up-to-date with any of the bad stuff happening beyond the top floor of his warehouse.

To be honest, not thinking about it has been kind of a relief. The fantasies that got him through the hot, heavy nights in the halfway house are distant memories now; the Avengers never came then, and they definitely never came after. The fact that when Iron Man finally *did* show up it was only after Peter was finally okay, finally able to take care of himself, is an irony not lost on Peter. The surreality of the day is intensified by the fact that he didn’t really think of the Avengers as *real* anymore; just a distant, heat-hazed dream.

A dream that, tomorrow, he’s flying to Germany to fight. Whatever the conflict surrounding them is, Peter is part of it now.

It occurs to Peter, as the news switches to a story about a twelve-year-old who won some singing competition before he can get the full gist of the bomb piece, that he probably should have pressed Mr. Stark for more information about what he was actually setting off to do. That Captain America had gone “bonkers” — Mr. Stark’s word—sounded... suspicious at best, a little treasonous at worst (Peter loved Steve Rogers almost as much as he loved Iron Man, in the time before the fantasies of them were washed away by (*bad things*) Skip and the halfway house), and the confusing jumble about “thinking he was right but actually being wrong” that followed did very little to clarify.

But... and maybe Peter is foolish for thinking it... is it so bad if he doesn’t really care? He should, he knows—global conflict and saving the world and all that—but right now, full of pad thai and nervous anticipation, Peter isn’t thinking about the world. He’s thinking of what it would have been like if a superhero *had* burst through the door on one of those nights when he and Felipe were lying

in bed, exhausted but in too much pain to sleep.

He's thinking what it would be like if *he* could be that superhero.

Working with Iron Man means resources. Maybe not money, not in Peter's current circumstances, but recognition, at least. Not that he's going for fame: it would just be nice if little old ladies didn't try to beat him up for trying to help them cross the street, or stop the people who were *actually* mugging them. With a little pull behind his name, Spider-Man could start making a real difference. Bring some attention to the things no one is looking at, to the kids no one sees. Maybe even burst through a few doors of his own, without having to be afraid that the people behind those doors will call the cops, turn him in, send him back to Skip—like he is now.

And if he has to beat up Captain America to do that, well, that seems like a fair price to Peter.

Peter finishes his dinner, and heads back out into the night.

Mr. Delmar was wrong—there are still a couple weeks left until summer break. But by eight pm, Midtown High School is completely abandoned. The cleaning staff is gone, the doors locked, the hallways dark except for the low emergency lights on at intervals between the classrooms. At this time of night, the only person who's ever inside is Peter.

Tonight, he slips through the second-story chem lab window—left open at night to air out the fumes of the day's chemical mishaps—just as he always does. On a normal night, Peter would head straight for the gym: tonight, he makes a pit stop in the back of this very classroom. That he should still have access to the school's rather eclectic collection of chemicals is his good fortune: he's been "borrowing" the necessary ingredients for his webs the entire time he's been living on the streets.

It's not really stealing—Peter knows for a fact Skip had paid his tuition through the next semester, and since he's not actually attending anymore, a few lost chemicals can't add up to more than what he's already put in—right?

No time to worry too much about the morals of the thing: Mr. Stark had hinted that he might have some upgrades for Peter's suit—a possibility Peter is trying desperately not to get too excited about—but that he should come ready with plenty of webs. Peter is also trying not to get too big-headed about the fact that Mr. Stark couldn't replicate his formula without a sample to work off of, so he purses his lips to stop the little smile that has been tugging at them all afternoon and forces his concentration as he mixes a beaker of fluid at one of the chemistry countertops, then takes the vial down to the shop to use the compressor, dodging the security cameras—whose layout he has memorized by now—as he goes.

When he's finished with the fluid, Peter heads for the gym.

As with the girls, Peter didn't have any intention of coming back here at first. He's aware of the risk he takes, probably unnecessarily, by frequenting one of the few places where Peter Parker could be recognized. For a month he had even paid the ten-dollar dues at the YMCA so he could use their showers, and occasionally pass the time on the colder days by shooting hoops in their gym. But the Y had turned out to be mostly an exercise in pointlessness, and a waste of money: whenever Peter got close to the men's locker room he would start to feel shivery and weak; the

thought of climbing into the shower, with nothing but a thin plastic curtain separating him from the rest of the gym-goers, made him want to vomit.

Filth, unfortunately, was also not an option. He'd spent a week foregoing bathing after his first attempt at the YMCA locker rooms, by the end of which the Spider-Man suit was so crusty with sweat and dirt and blood Peter couldn't even feel resentful when a gaggle of highschool girls called the cops on him for trying to return a dropped wallet. Homelessness might allow for some leeway when it comes to personal hygiene, but hero-ing is a different story.

He got the idea to try Midtown from those few weeks he spent here with Ned, back at the Arlingtons, back when Peter's idea of a bad day was when Mrs. Arlington would smack him for blocking the television. There's no Ned now, of course, and he can't come in the afternoon, lose himself amidst the students and their extracurriculars... and yet, the school remains a refuge. Maybe even more than the warehouse; big and warm and empty, Midtown might not feel like *home*, precisely, but it's something close. Like visiting a park or a museum he'd loved as a child; the magic might not be as strong as it once was, but the impression of it still lingers.

Peter showers. He scrubs the day's sweat off the mask in the sink, holds it under the hand dryers until it's ready to stuff back in his pocket. Spares himself just a glance in the mirror before he leaves.

The Peter he sees is not the Peter of three months ago. His hair is longer, limp curls spilling out in every direction, and his cheeks are a little hollower. He's not exactly *thin* —Peter's been thin before, and thin doesn't include layers of wiry muscle, courtesy of a radioactive spider bite—but he's definitely lost some baby fat since he left Skip's, and started watching his food intake more carefully. Small price to pay, though Peter's aware it's turned his face into a weird conundrum: he looks older and younger at the same time. More than once strangers—mostly women, many of them with young kids—have approached him on the street or at the library to ask if he's okay, then walked away frowning when Peter insists he's fine, like they can't decide if they should believe him.

It puts Peter on edge more than anything that happens when he's wearing the mask. Spider-Man's age never gets questioned. Spider-Man's *abilities* never get questioned. Spider-Man can stop a speeding car. Spider-Man gets recruited by Tony Stark to fight alongside the Avengers. Spider-Man is strong.

Peter Parker, on the other hand....

Peter blinks, tears his eyes away from the mirror. There's a reason he doesn't like to linger in the bathroom, even when he's alone. It seems like no matter how far he runs or how much time passes, the Peter from that last night at Skip's is always waiting for him in mirrors.

For good measure, Peter tugs the mask over his face as he heads back out into the hall.

He passes Ned's locker on the way out, just as he always does. Just as he always does, Peter hesitates, thinking about what would happen if he didn't just walk by this time. If he left a note. The temptation, tonight, is especially strong: what would Ned say if he knew Peter had just eaten lunch with *Tony Stark*?

Ned's imagined excitement gives Peter a flare of warmth in the pit of his stomach, but he quickly swallows it. Ned is in the past now. Ned is still better off without him. Maybe more so than ever.

Instead of a note, Peter raps his knuckles on the locker twice, and then he heads home.

“Are you freaking serious with this?”

Peter, who has been sitting awkwardly in his suit on the steps of the main branch of the New York Public Library for the past half hour, startles and scrambles to his feet. Happy Hogan, famous former bodyguard for Tony Stark, is leaning out the window of a town car, scowling at him.

“Uh,” says Peter, “hi.”

“I thought Tony was joking about the mask. Are you for real?”

Peter shrugs. He’s blushing, but that’s not new; he’s been blushing since he arrived at the library this morning, an hour before he was supposed to be there, too giddy with excitement to sleep. The suit is great for crime fighting; lingering—not so much. He’s been drawing stares from the moment he arrived.

Happy gives an exasperated sigh. “Fine. Whatever. Where’s your stuff?”

Peter gestures to his person.

“Really? You do know Germany is another country, right? No pajamas? Not even a neck pillow?”

“Uh...”

Happy groans. “Just get in the car. Unbelievable.”

“Mr. Stark just said—”

“Yeah, *he’s* the unbelievable one. I swear, my life gets more like Loony Toons every day. What’s with the library? Apparently I’m a chauffeur again, I could have picked you up at home.”

“Just... seemed more convenient.”

In truth, Peter picked the library because of its proximity to Columbia University. He knows how he looks under the mask, even without the reminder the glimpse in the mirror last night gave him. If Mr. Stark catches sight of him without the mask for any reason, Peter’s best defense is a good cover story—he can’t go too old (lord willing his voice will get deeper someday, but for now he’ll work with what he has), but he figures college is a safe bet. He can drop a few hints, like the library, that he’s an undergraduate, and hopefully in doing so throw off any suspicion about his real identity. It’s actually kind of a perfect cover: pretending to be a college student also explains his erratic Spider-Man activities, which he probably couldn’t pull off as either a high school student or an adult with a job.

Happy opens the back door of the town car, and Peter is surprised to find that it’s empty, save for a minibar in the middle console. He swallows disappointment as he climbs inside, and Happy shuts the door behind him.

“Is Mr. Stark meeting us?” he asks as Happy climbs in front. “He said—”

“He didn’t say anything,” says Happy. “I’m the one you’ve been texting. Happy Hogan.”

He sticks his hand through the divider and Peter shakes it once, lets go quickly.

“I’m, um, Spider-Man. Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, I’m definitely not calling you that. Tony’s meeting us there. So. You all good, kid? Ready to go?”

Peter nods.

“Then let’s get this over with,” says Happy, and he veers off the curb and into New York City traffic.

“What is that? What are you saying?”

Peter jumps. Watching the city pass by from the window of what is by far the nicest car he’s ever been in is different from anything Peter has ever experienced, having mostly taken the bus and the subway throughout his life; it’s different even from web-slinging. The people roll by in faceless blurs, anonymous and innumerable.

He doesn’t realize he’s been mumbling to himself until Happy snaps at him.

“Are you narrating? Is that what’s going on back there? Do you have some sort of recorder in that dumb mask thing? Because you know you can’t tell anyone about this.”

“I know,” says Peter, the back of his neck hot. “I’m not recording. It’s just, um, fun.”

(Shut up, you idiot, or why don’t you just rip the mask off and paint I’m fourteen on your forehead while you’re at it?)

The appearance of the ghoul, who never leaves but is generally quieter these days, is unpleasant but not unexpected. Peter’s chest has felt increasingly tighter the longer he’s been in the car, the close quarters seeming to press in on him more and more the longer they drive. Talking to himself is a compensation mechanism. He does it when he’s on patrol, too, and on the nights he can’t sleep.

Still, he shuts up now.

It’s a relief when Happy finally pulls onto the tarmac, though. Peter gets out of the car before Happy can make it around to the door, trying to convince himself that the way the tightness eases as soon as he’s in the open air is just because they are out of the smog of Manhattan.

Irrational. He knows it is. *(It wasn’t last time.)* But even though he knows this, the shakiness still prevents him from fully marveling at the private jet that is waiting for them on the asphalt, even as Happy ushers him aboard.

“Don’t I have to go through security?” he says as he climbs the steps.

“Really? You think security would let you through looking like that? And I’m guessing you don’t have a passport tucked into those sweatpants. Tony pulled some major strings to get you on our side, guy. All I’m saying is you’d better be worth it.”

This, more than the deep breaths he is taking or the steady internal monologue that is coaxing the ghoul back into the shadows, gets Peter to pull it together.

You're Spider-Man, he reminds himself, even as he takes the seat in the corner of the plane, as far away from Happy as possible (Happy grunts at this and nods shortly, which Peter takes to mean he approves). *And this time, you're going to prove it.*

Unpredictability

There are no upgrades for Peter's suit when they arrive in Germany.

There is, instead, *a whole freaking new suit*.

Peter didn't sleep much on the plane—or at all, actually. He wants to think it was because of the little noises coming from the wings and the cargo hold, as whatever luggage they were carrying shifted slightly (Peter hadn't wanted to admit he'd never been on a plane before, so he'd bitten down on his anxious questions) but somewhere around hour four he had to admit that it probably wasn't just the plane, which had remained steadfastly airborne throughout. As much as he hated to realize it, *Happy* was the reason he couldn't close his eyes, the reason he kept catching himself gripping the armrests on his chair so hard he left finger-shaped dents in the leather. Peter didn't like the feeling of being so close to another person, thousands of feet in the air, even if that person spent most of the trip snoring louder than the jet engines.

Recognizing this has filled Peter with guilt and shame. Happy hasn't done anything to him. Happy even dug a pillow and blanket out of an overhead bin and handed them to Peter with a grunt when he woke up mid-flight and saw Peter sitting ramrod-straight in the corner, clearly wide awake. Happy works for Iron Man. He's one of the good guys.

And even though Peter knows all of this, he *still* couldn't bring himself to close his eyes.

Considering how little he slept the night before the plane, Peter is just shy of exhausted by the time they arrive at the hotel. But that exhaustion disappears the moment Happy hands him the suit.

"Oh my God," says Peter. "Oh my God, is this—are you serious? Is this for me?"

"Did you seriously think Tony was gonna let you fight Captain America looking like that? Now put it on. We've got places to be."

Thankfully, Happy leaves the room to allow Peter to change.

The moment the door clicks shut, Peter rips his old mask off and runs his hands over the sleek new one. He can feel wiring, light and subtle, within the fabric, which is like nothing he's ever felt before, sleek and cool and soft but supple and flexible at the same time. Immediately, Peter is itching to get a better look inside, to figure out what it's made of, what it does, how it works—but not as eager as he is to get it on. He barely notices that he is bouncing on the balls of his feet as he struggles out of his grubby, stained, patched-up sweatsuit and yanks the sleek mystery fiber on in its place, gasping when it automatically tightens to a perfect fit.

"Holy crap," says Peter. "Holy crap, this is the best day of my life."

And it only gets better from there.

Peter fights Captain America.

He *actually fights Captain America*. Never mind that that was what he came here to do in the first

place: until he was actually *holding the actual Captain America's actual freaking shield*, Peter didn't realize how much he was doubting that any of this was actually real. But it is all real: Peter is actually in Germany, actually fighting the Avengers, actually wearing a suit made by Tony Stark and taking orders from the man himself while dodging Steve Rogers' physics-defying kicks and punches and shield.

Peter doesn't even care when Captain America drops a jet bridge on him: if he died right now, he's pretty sure he would die the happiest kid in the world.

And maybe it's because he's so happy, for the first time since... well, *forever*, or maybe it's because he's holding up what is probably a literal ton of weight with his bare hands, but that's the moment Peter has his first slip up: When Cap asks where he's from, Peter answers automatically, "Queens."

He feels his face, already crimson from the effort of holding the bridge, deepen to puce, feels his heart quicken. But Cap just grins—almost cheekily, like they are playing a game of touch football instead of having an epic, superpowered battle—and says, "Brooklyn."

And then he takes off.

Peter gets out from under the bridge eventually. He takes a deep breath. Of all the people he could have revealed his actual neighborhood to today, Steve Rogers is probably the one he has to worry about least: he and Mr. Stark are clearly not talking.

He shakes it off, and rejoins the fight.

Peter's second slip up is more serious.

In his own defense, it comes right after something genuinely mind-blowing happens: the new guy—the other one—has just suddenly expanded to roughly the same size as the 747s sitting on the tarmac.

Peter, who has just fought the Falcon and the Winter soldier *at once*—and *successfully*, he might add—should probably be a little cooler about the whole unbelievable-things-happening-everywhere vibe of the day, but when he runs out to help Mr. Stark and Colonel Rhodes take the giant guy down, he totally loses his chill. Because he knows what to do. He knows what to do right away, because of all the old movies he and Uncle Ben used to watch together, *Star Wars* had been his uncle's absolute favorite. Peter has seen them more times than he can count.

So the idea comes instantly—and when Peter gets an idea in his head, it always makes its way to his mouth sooner or later. Sooner, in this case.

He's running along the top of a plane, dodging blows from a man whose hand is twice the size of his body and already leaping into his potentially-a-little-half-baked plan when he shouts, "Have you guys ever seen that really old movie, *Empire Strikes Back*?"

"Jesus, Tony," says Colonel Rhodes across the comm link, "*how old is this guy?*"

Peter's heart leaps into his throat so fast he'd probably choke on it if he weren't still concentrating on avoiding the giant guy's fists. It rises a little higher when Tony replies, "*I don't know, I didn't*

carbon date him. He's on the young side."

(He knows, he knows, he knows, you're done for Peter you're—)

Peter swallows the panic. He forces himself to keep talking.

"You know the part where they're on the snow planet? With the walking thingies?"

He might already be in hot water, but he's not going to sink deeper by revealing that he is, on top of being fourteen, a total nerd. He doubts Mr. Stark and Colonel Rhodes would know what AT-ATs are, anyway.

And, miraculously, it works—at least for a moment. As Mr. Stark cottons on to Peter's plan, he seems to forget all about Peter's age, turning his attention, instead, to coordinating his next maneuver with Colonel Rhodes. Peter turns his own attention to angling himself so his next swing brings him around the huge guy's knees. And when the huge guy starts to fall, wrapped in Peter's webs, Peter forgets too.

"That was awesome!" he shouts, flinging a thumbs up as he swings in a wide arc above the slowly-toppling giant. "That was—!"

And then the giant's hand rises out of nowhere, and everything goes dark.

He's only out for a second, but it's enough that when Peter wakes up, it takes a moment for him to orient himself, to remember where his is and what he's doing there, and in that moment Peter feels a terrible pressure in his chest, an aching darkness in the back of his skull. There is a phantom whiff of beer and foul breath on the air, and he has to get out of here, has to run, he can't do it again, he can't—

His eyes snap open, and his fists fly up.

"Woah, hey, hey." Someone grabs his wrists, wrestles him down. "Same side, remember?"

Peter freezes. That's not Skip's voice. That's Mr. Stark's.

The darkness sloughs away. He's not lying in his bed in Skip's apartment—he's lying on the tarmac at an airport in Germany, amidst the remains of the half dozen wooden boxes he pulverized when he fell. And Mr. Stark is crouching over him, suit on but faceplate retracted, wearing an expression that Peter can't immediately place.

"Oh," Peter says sheepishly, "hey man. That was—that was really scary."

Mr. Stark releases him, and Peter's hands immediately fly to his mask. It's risen above his mouth, but not more than in the sandwich shop; still, he yanks it down as he tries to sit up, his head spinning, senses returning.

"Yeah," says Mr. Stark, "you're *done*."

"What?" *He's already getting rid of me?* "No, I can still help, I gotta get the—"

"Stay down," says Mr. Stark, pushing him down as he tries once again to rise. "Stay down, chill out. You did good, kid, just take a breather."

Something grinds into place in Peter's brain. Mr. Stark isn't reprimanding him, or trying to get rid of him. The expression on his face isn't anger, either. It's... *concern*.

Peter's brain goes utterly blank. He hasn't seen that look on an adult's face in over a year.

He stops trying to get back up.

Mr. Stark glances over his shoulder. The fight is moving away from the tarmac, but it is still going on. He has to get back to it.

He looks back down at Peter.

"Seriously, stay there," he says. "Happy'll scoop you, got it?"

"I can—"

"Let mommy and daddy finish their fight, kiddo. We'll catch up later."

And just like that, Mr. Stark is gone.

As he disappears, so does the adrenaline that has been keeping Peter moving. Though he still has half a mind to disobey Mr. Stark and try to rejoin the battle, his body has other ideas: he lays back, woozy, and wraps his arm around his left side ribcage, where at least a few ribs are definitely cracked. He hisses as he probes them, and then—grins.

Peter lets his head drop back onto the asphalt.

"Best day ever," he says.

And he promptly blacks out.

The second time Peter comes around there is, once again, a man standing over him. Once again, the man is not Skip, but this time it's not Mr. Stark either. It's Happy, looking exasperated as he snaps his fingers in front of Peter's nose.

"Hello," he says, as Peter startles awake. "Hello. Hey. Yeah, you. Nap time's over. Are you alive? Do I need to take you to the hospital?"

Peter scrambles to sit. His ribs scream their protest as he does, but he bites down on the pain, pastes on an unnecessary smile underneath the mask.

There is no way he's going to the hospital.

"Hey, Happy," he says. "Uh—fancy seeing you here. Nope, no hospital needed. All good here. Just, um, just taking a breather, as ordered."

He gives a nervous laugh, but the ruse works: Happy huffs, rolls his eyes, and gets to his feet, offering Peter a hand to help him to his. When Peter stands, his head swims: a cheeky grin does not *actually* make up for a truck-sized fist to the ribs, nor does a brief unconsciousness on the asphalt make up for the fact that he has barely slept for two days—or eaten, now that he thinks about it—but he still forces himself not to sway as Happy leads him away from the wreckage of the battle and to a waiting car, into which Peter crawls without a word of protest.

"What happened?" he says as he lays down across the back seat. Happy climbs in front and turns

the car on. “Did we win?”

“Oof.” Happy starts to drive, but Peter can’t bring himself to sit up and see where they’re going. “You were out of it. Did you not see the quinjet blasting off with Captain Goody Two-Shoes and his brainwashed BFF? No? Well, that’s what happened while you were hitting the snooze button on the ground there.”

“We *lost*?”

“Hey. Tony Stark doesn’t *lose*, kid. It’s not over yet.”

“So Mr. Stark went after them?”

Happy grunts. “Not yet. There was a—uh—a complication. He’s taking care of it now.”

“Is everyone okay?”

“No. Yes. They will be. Has anyone ever told you you ask way too many questions?”

“Yes.” It’s true: *too many questions* used to be the common refrain of every one of his teachers. Before Ben died, anyway. “So he is going after them? Does he need my help? Where does he think they went? Do you think it’s—”

“Did I not just say to nix the questions, *Spider-Man*?” says Happy, with more than a hint of irony.

Peter’s stomach clenches, as memories of his battle-loosened tongue return to him. Did Mr. Stark say something to Happy? A dozen explanations bubble into his throat, but he bites down on them, clamping down on the ghoul at the same time: he has no proof that they know anything. He just has to play it cool and wait to see if they do, in which case he’ll just—

Okay, so he doesn’t know what he’ll do. Run for it, probably. Of course, he’d probably make it about three feet before Mr. Stark caught up with him—he is Iron Man, after all—but he’d have to at least *try*.

Because the alternative, whether it’s back into the system or worse—back to Skip—is not an option.

Peter is still stewing on this unpleasant notion when they arrive back at the hotel. Only when he climbs out of the back seat, gingerly, does he recognize a potential flaw in the plan to *just run for it*: They are still in Germany.

Well. Maybe he could make it work. Peter likes strudel. The toaster kind, anyway.

But Happy isn’t acting like he’s about to reprimand Peter for his youth, or pack him onto a plane to send him back to CPS. He just walks Peter into the hotel through the same back entrance they used earlier, then back to the room where Peter changed into the suit a few hours ago.

Once they’re inside, Happy gestures to the walls.

“No cameras,” he says. He points at the door. “That has a lock, and you” —he reaches into his pocket, pulls out a key card, and hands it to Peter— “have the only key. So if you want to stop being a total weirdo and take off the mask, you can. But by the way, this is all redundant. Tony sticks to his word. He’s one of the few people left who still does.”

Happy starts to leave.

“Wait!” Peter is still reeling, still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Happy turns back. “So you—so I’m not in trouble or... or anything?”

“Trouble?” Happy raises an eyebrow. “Kid, Tony said you did great. He doesn’t say that a lot.” Happy gives Peter a sweeping look. “Still can’t say much for his fashion sense, though. Get some rest, guy. We’ll take you home in the morning.”

And with that Happy leaves Peter alone.

Peter stands still at the center of the room for a long time. His heart is still pumping, his ribs searing, but these sensations are muted under the warm glow that is emanating from somewhere at the center of Peter’s body. It’s the same feeling he got when he let Mickey go, except amplified a hundred times over. It takes Peter a second to recognize it as pride.

“He said I did great,” he murmurs.

Eventually, Peter remembers that he can—and should—move. Or rather, his body remembers for him. His knees lock up and he stumbles, catching himself against the dresser.

“Whoops,” he says, pushing himself upright. “Right, taking it easy. Resting. No problemo.”

Peter makes it the two steps to the king-sized bed and lowers himself to sit on it, pulling the mask off as he does. Peter’s not too worried about his ribs; he’s cracked more than a few crashing into buildings, especially when he was still getting used to web-slinging, and they usually more or less heal overnight, stop being tender after a day or two. He just has to sleep it off, which should be easy in this gigantic bed—the first one he’s had for three months. The sticky, cloying bitterness at the back of his throat when he thinks about climbing under the covers is just fatigue and excess adrenaline from the day’s events, he’s sure of it. He just has to lay down.

Before he can force himself to, however, Peter notices a paper shopping bag at the foot of the bed. It has his name on it. Well, it has “Spider-Man” written on it, with the quotation marks in an especially bold hand; still, there’s no mistaking who it’s meant for.

Peter picks it up, opens it. Inside is a pair of flannel pajama bottoms, jeans, sneakers, and three t-shirts, all in his size, all brand new. He pulls out the topmost shirt and holds it up: printed on the front is the periodic symbol for iron, followed by the word “MAN.”

Inexplicably, Peter’s eyes fill with tears. Or maybe it’s not inexplicable: this is exactly the kind of shirt Ben would have bought for him. It’s just that the tears are *silly*. It’s only a shirt, after all.

Peter wipes them away. He grabs the pajama pants, the Iron Man shirt, and heads into the bathroom, where he showers first, then fills the enormous tub almost to the brim, turns out the lights, and soaks for a while, waiting for his side to stop throbbing.

It’s nice. It is, undoubtedly, the nicest bath Peter has ever had, and the absolute, undeniable, best-ever day. And yet, from the moment he looked at that dumb t-shirt, the prickle in his eyes and the back of his throat doesn’t go away. He finds himself battling tears as he towels off and pulls the clothes on, and then again when he heads back into the bedroom and sits on the bed, facing the blank TV screen and realizing he has no idea what to do with himself.

He can’t sleep. He’s too giddy, too wound-up, too—something. Back in his warehouse he would normally be going through his nightly routine about now—fold the suit, count his money, check the stash, then lie awake in his blanket nest and listen to the sounds of the city grow quieter, until everything felt still and distant and safe. There’s not much noise here, at least—just Happy,

snoring in the next room over—but beyond that Peter can't calm himself, not even enough to turn on the TV. He's itching to take a closer look at the suit—neatly folded on the chair by his bed—but now that the battle is over, thinking about it makes whatever weird anxiety is keeping him in his seat quadruple.

(It's not yours, Peter. What do you think Mr. Stark will do if he catches you rifling through his things without permission? Or did you not learn your lesson at the halfway house?)

"Shut up," Peter mutters, but the reprimand is lost when his stomach gives an almighty growl.

It's only then that he realizes he hasn't eaten since the airplane, where Happy had given him a sandwich and a Coke. That's probably why his side is still hurting so badly—that, and the lack of sleep. He's noticed that his accelerated healing is considerably less accelerated when he's hungry, or very tired, but a quick search around the room reveals only a minibar full of ten-euro packets of peanuts and m&ms, and if the suit gave him halfway-house flashbacks, the minibar is ten times worse. He slams it shut without taking anything. He'll have to go out—except he doesn't have any German money. Or any money. Or any idea how to navigate Berlin with nothing but his burner phone.

Okay. So that's—okay. He'll just wait until tomorrow. He's gone longer than this without eating, even in the time since he's been living on his own.

(But it's not the not eating, dummy, it's the not knowing. You have no idea when they're going to feed you again, which is exactly why I tell you never to put yourself in this position, you're never supposed to rely on other people to take care of what only you can guarantee.)

Unconsciously, Peter launches himself off the bed once more and begins to pace.

(What if something else goes wrong, huh, Peter? What if Mr. Stark doesn't come back tomorrow? What if you just wait and wait and they never feed you again, never put you back on that plane so you can get back to the place where you can feed yourself? You should have thought of this before you just ran off to another country without a thought in your head, but here we are, right back where we started before: with you, helpless.)

The ghoul has not been this loud since he left Skip's. Normally Peter can shut it out, distract himself with Spider-Man, but tonight there are no distractions. He is all alone.

(That's right, Peter. You're all alone. Because this is what happens when you trust people: they use you for what you're good for and then they throw you out like garbage, like the Arlingtons did, like Skip did. And you won't learn, you won't—)

"Shut up!"

Right as the words leave his mouth, there is a knock at the door. Peter jumps so hard he almost ends up on the ceiling; he only remembers to grab his mask at the very last second and then, trembling, goes to unlock the door.

Behind it is Mr. Stark, dressed in the most casual outfit Peter has ever seen him in—jogging pants and a matching jacket—with an eyebrow raised over the black eye he's been sporting since Peter met him.

"Having a nice chat with yourself?" he says. "Or shouting match, it sounds like?"

Peter, still stunned, mumbles something about the TV.

“Uh-huh,” says Mr. Stark. “I see we’re still doing the mask thing. Are you gonna invite me in or what?”

Peter nearly trips over himself in his haste to step aside.

Mr. Stark, on the other hand, doesn’t falter as he strides into the room. It’s kind of incredible, actually, how he can just walk in anywhere and look so at ease, like he automatically owns the place. It occurs to Peter then that Mr. Stark could very possibly own this hotel, and he is suddenly embarrassed. Even dressed in the new clothes Happy gave him, he feels very small, very shabby. It’s the first time he’s been in Mr. Stark’s presence without his suit.

But the impression of grandeur lasts just a second: with a long-suffering sigh, Mr. Stark flings himself face-down on the bed.

For a second he lays there—long enough that Peter starts to wonder if he’s passed out—and then he rolls onto his back, arms splayed out to his sides, and says to the ceiling, “I am getting *way* too old for this, kid.”

Tentatively, Peter makes his way back into the bedroom to stand closer to the bed. When he doesn’t say anything, Mr. Stark raises his head, then sits up.

“How you doing there, uh, Spider-Man? God, that sounds weird in a non-superpowered-showdown type setting. Are you sure you haven’t got a real name for, you know... black-tie events? Pizza parties? I genuinely don’t know what you do with your free time, so I’m just spitballing here.”

“Just Spider-Man,” says Peter.

Mr. Stark quirks a smile.

“All right, Spidey. I can work with what I’ve got. Pop a squat kid, let’s chat.”

Nervously, Peter shuffles around the edge of the bed, shifts the suit from the chair to the floor, and takes its place. Mr. Stark watches him with an amused half-smile that suggests he expected Peter to sit on the bed, but he doesn’t comment.

“Um,” says Peter, “is everyone okay? Happy made it sound like someone might have gotten hurt.”

Mr. Stark’s smile fades.

“Rhodey took a hit,” he says. “That’s where I was, he’s been in surgery.”

“Is he—?”

“He’ll be fine.” Mr. Stark’s voice is tense, makes Peter tense too, even though he doesn’t think it’s directed at him. “Or—fine-ish. Don’t worry your potentially-pretty little head about it, okay? I’m taking care of it.” The harsh edge disappears from Mr. Stark’s expression as he glances around the room. “So, what’s for eating, Spidey? I’m not a big bratwurst fan, but if you’re doing the whole ‘when in Rome’ thing, I can get on board.”

Peter’s neck burns red. Did he miss something? Some food or some money? Was he pacing around the room shouting at himself like an idiot because he didn’t look closely enough?

When Peter doesn’t reply fast enough, Mr. Stark raises an eyebrow again.

“You haven’t eaten yet?”

“I... didn’t bring any money?”

“What? Is this some weird pride thing? Do you think we’re gonna bill you for the room? No offense, kid, but you don’t look like you’re good for it. This here is an all-expenses paid vacation—you know, of the illegal, border-hopping, secret-identity-smuggling variety. Grub’s on me, kid. What’s your poison?”

Without waiting for a reply, Mr. Stark grabs the phone from the bedside table, puts it to his ear, and says something to the person on the other line in rapid-fire German.

Peter’s brain seems to be short-circuiting. The ghoul is still jabbering, but it’s lowered to an incomprehensible hiss at the back of his mind, and the flip-flopping between extreme emotions has rendered his actual, intentional thoughts incoherent. He can’t think why Mr. Stark is here—surely there are better restaurants in Germany he could have gone to, ones that don’t include awkward conversations with masked vigilantes?—until the man in question hangs the phone up and turns to Peter.

“All right. Let’s see it. Hup hup.”

He makes a gesture with his hands like he wants Peter to pick something up. Peter looks around.

“The ribs, Spidey. Suit says you’re injured. So show.”

Peter doesn’t move. “You put medical scanners in the suit?”

“I put everything in your suit. Med alerts, heater, parachute, the works. Don’t worry,” he adds, as though he can read Peter’s expression under the mask, “the trackers are emergency-activated, I’m not trying to renege on our promise. It just means you can’t lie to me as easily as you lied to Happy back on the tarmac. If you need to get looked at—”

“I don’t,” says Peter hastily. “It’s fine, I’ve had way worse.”

“Uh-huh. Well, from one prideful, breakable superhero to another, it never hurts to have a second opinion on what’s ‘fine.’ So...”

He once again gestures to Peter’s shirt.

The ghoul starts to shriek.

When Peter still doesn’t move, Tony says, “Unless you have a birthmark in the shape of your own face under your left nipple, I doubt I’m gonna identify you from your ribcage. Same side, no broken promises, yadda yadda yadda, remember? Just—”

He makes the gesture again, more impatient this time.

He’s worried, Peter realizes, with the same surreal unfamiliarity he felt when he saw Mr. Stark’s concern at the airport. *He’s worried about me.*

The thought is enough to quieten the instinct that is screaming at him to do the opposite of what Mr. Stark is requesting. Not all the way—just enough he is able to get to his feet and, hands quaking, pull the left-side edge of his t-shirt up over the offending ribs.

Mr. Stark hisses when he sees the deep purple bruise, leaning forward to get a better look. Peter flinches, bites down on another flight impulse—but Mr. Stark doesn’t touch.

“Are you sure—”

“I heal,” says Peter. “I heal fast. Really fast. It’s really okay.”

He drops the shirt back down, tries not to shiver with relief when he is fully covered once more.

Mr. Stark leans back slowly, looking doubtful.

“How’d you get your powers, by the way?”

“Um.” Peter lowers himself back into his chair. “Radioactive spider bite?”

Mr. Stark stares at him for a solid ten seconds. Then he bursts out laughing.

“Fine, fine,” he says, “keep that secret too. I like you, Spider-Man. You’re funny. And the Star Wars thing? Not bad. Oh—and it’s called an AT-AT, by the way. Your walking thingie.”

Peter opens his mouth, but before he can formulate a response there is a knock at the door. The room service has arrived.

Mr. Stark has ordered the works. Literally—it looks like he just told them to bring the whole menu. And it’s not bratwursts. Not *just* bratwursts, anyway. There is American food too: burgers and pizza and cake, and even some fresh fruit, though that’s not where Peter’s eyes go first.

Peter half expects Tony to just take his portion and turn in, but he doesn’t: it appears he means to eat with Peter. He even lets Peter take first dibs, which he does, albeit with some difficulty: with the echoes of his minor freakout from twenty minutes ago still in the back of his brain, he has to quell the urge to hide half of his portion.

But he does quell it. And then he sits and eats his food, alongside Tony Stark, in a hotel room in Germany, having just done battle with the Avengers. Most of them, anyway.

Peter has known for a long time now that life is unpredictable. But he’s come to expect to be unpredictable in a more... predictable way.

This is totally out of his wheelhouse.

Mr. Stark doesn’t talk much as he eats. Once the food is divvied up the humor leaves his expression, replaced by one that is more contemplative, more serious. So Peter follows his lead, staying quiet, forcing himself to chew slowly and watching the older man out of the corner of his eye, trying to get a read on him. Why is he still here? What does he want? More help? Maybe he’s going to ask Peter to help him go after Captain America. He said Peter did well, didn’t he?

(Or maybe he wants something else.)

The thought is so unexpected, so intrusive, and so disgusting that Peter can’t stop himself. He hisses, “*Stop it.*”

He hisses it out loud.

Peter immediately clamps his mouth shut, but too late: Mr. Stark looks up from the remains of his burger.

“You do that a lot, don’t you?”

Act like a crazy person?

“Talk to yourself,” Mr. Stark goes on. “You were doing it at the airport, too.”

“I was?” says Peter raspily.

“It’s not an accusation,” Mr. Stark says mildly. “An observation.”

“I guess. I guess sometimes it’s just nice to, um. Process out loud.”

“Not too many people to talk to in your line of work, I guess.”

“I guess not.”

“It’s lonely when no one knows who you are,” says Mr. Stark. “Hell, it’s lonely no matter what, but to do this on your own, without anyone who knows both sides of you... I only lasted about fifteen minutes before I, you know, revealed myself to the world or whatever.” He leans toward Peter again. “Are you really sure the mask is the way to go, kid?”

For a second—just a second—Peter lets himself imagine what it would be like to take the mask off. To let Mr. Stark see him for what he is: a fourteen-year-old kid who talks to himself not because he’s lonely, but because he doesn’t know any other way to get his brain to shut up when it starts to go haywire. Who can’t even calm himself long enough to enjoy what is undoubtedly the most incredible day he’s ever had. The most incredible day *any* fourteen-year-old has ever had.

For once, he tries to see the best possible outcome, instead of all of the terrible ones. He imagines Mr. Stark being shocked, then angry, then shouting at Peter for a while for all the lies. And when all that was done, maybe Mr. Stark would help him find a new foster family. Maybe he’d look in every once in a while, to make sure they were treating him okay. And that could be fine: what kind of person would mess with a kid who had Iron Man checking up on him? Even Skip wouldn’t be so bold. Probably, anyway.

But even this best-case scenario has an enormous downside: he can’t see any way Mr. Stark, or a new family for that matter, would ever let him keep being Spider-Man.

And since Spider-Man is all he has, it just isn’t an option.

Peter nods.

Mr. Stark sighs and gets to his feet.

“In that case I’m gonna need the suit.”

Peter’s heart sinks, but it’s not like he wasn’t expecting this. He sets his plate aside and stands, picking the suit up as he does.

“I don’t know what Happy did with my other one, um, I’ll need—”

“Nah, keep the mask. The mainframe is all contained in the main body, upgrades sync with the mask when you put them both on. You’re into tech stuff, right? I can show you sometime, once this whole debacle is over.”

Peter is as boggled by this as he was by Mr. Stark’s initial appearance. Numbly, he hands the suit over, leaves the mask on.

“Upgrades?”

“Just one, for now. If you’re gonna keep ‘processing out loud,’ you might as well have someone to

talk to.”

Peter doesn’t know what this means, but he’s too afraid to ask in case asking somehow breaks the magic of what he thinks is happening.

What he thinks is happening is this:

“I get to keep the suit?”

“What, you thought I was gonna send you back out on the streets in your long-johns, Underoos?”

Even though he can’t see it, Mr. Stark correctly guesses at Peter’s look of disdain, and he grins as he drapes the suit over one arm and heads for the door.

“To be fair, you did tell me to stop calling it a onesie,” he says. “You did good today, Spider-Man. See you tomorrow?”

Peter nods dumbly.

And, with a wink, Mr. Stark takes his leave.

Mr. Stark and Happy do, in fact, take Peter back to New York in the morning. Peter is fresher the next day: he finally managed to sleep once he pulled the blankets off his bed and made himself a much-cozier copy of his bed at the warehouse, and with the room service and the rest, his ribs are more or less completely healed by the time he boards the plane. His mood sinks, however, when he realizes that Mr. Stark once again will not be joining them for the flight. Happy grunts something about him meeting them in the city, but does not elaborate, which leaves Peter to spend the eight-hour flight berating himself for getting his hopes up.

Still, even with the many, many talks he gave himself while Happy dozed on the other side of the private jet, Peter can’t help the little thrill of excitement he feels when Mr. Stark meets them at the airport in New York. It’s enough that he’s able to suppress the discomfort that comes with climbing into a car with not one but two grown men so that Happy can take him back to the library.

The excitement fades as they drive. Mr. Stark is more subdued today, less talkative. He keeps checking his phone, sending messages to unknown parties, and snapping at Happy about the traffic. It makes Peter want to say something clever to lighten the mood—to make Mr. Stark say he’s “funny” again, maybe—but he’s too nervous to think of anything.

They arrive at the main branch of the New York City Public Library in silence.

When Happy brings the car to a halt, Mr. Stark finally looks up from his phone.

“Great,” he says. “Is this it? You all good? Do you need me to fake a doctor’s note for your—for whatever it is you do when you’re not lassoing criminals and saving children from trees?”

“Kittens,” Happy says.

“Don’t correct me,” says Mr. Stark. “The kid and I are talking. Keep your eyes on the road.”

“We’re parked.”

“You know, I think the idea of this promotion has gone to your head. You’re being unusually snarky.” He turns to Peter. “Did Happy tell you he’s vying for Head of Asset Management? He’s been blowing me up about it for months—”

Happy turns in his seat, indignant. “That was personal. You know it’s hard for me to talk to you about that stuff, you—”

“Anyway,” says Mr. Stark, while Peter stares awkwardly between them, “I believe this belongs to you.”

He hands him the heavy metal case containing the new suit.

“And this.”

He hands him a duffel bag. When Peter opens it, he sees it contains the remaining clothes they bought him in Germany, as well as his old suit.

“Mr. Stark,” he says as he looks up, his voice wavering, “I really don’t know what to say. This whole thing has been—”

“Ah ah.” Mr Stark holds up a hand. “I’m actually not super great with the whole feelings thing, kid, so can we just, you know—put her there?”

He aims a finger gun at Peter, who gulps, nods.

“Great. Well—”

Mr. Stark leans forward. Like he’s about to *hug* Peter.

Peter snaps backward so fast his head whacks against the window, his whole body going rigid. Mr. Stark backs off immediately, holding his hands up, while in the front seat Happy turns around more fully to stare at Peter. Peter, who can feel shame rising in his cheeks but can’t seem to get his body to relax, even as Mr. Stark stares at him like he’s just suddenly caught fire.

“Did I not just say I’m not into the touchy-feely stuff?” he says. “Not a hug, just—reaching for the door. We’re, uh, not quite there yet.”

Peter could die. He could actually die, right here in this town car.

He fumbles for the door handle and practically falls out of the car in his haste to be free from the confined space.

Mr. Stark recovers more quickly than Peter does.

“Great,” he says. “Go forth, young buck. Go do—whatever it is you do.”

He starts to close the door, but Peter grabs it at the last moment.

“Wait,” he says. “What if—I mean, I’m around, if you need me again.”

Peter is surprised at his own tenacity. This was never the plan—he can’t *join the Avengers* and keep his identity secret at the same time. Germany was supposed to be a one-off, to gain some clout and maybe some brand recognition, and then get back to his life of, as Mr. Stark said, lassoing criminals and saving children. And kittens.

But something happened on that tarmac, and in the hotel room after. He remembers what it felt like

to see that look of concern on Mr. Stark's face. What it was like to have someone tell him he did great.

He wants more of that.

"Yeah," says Mr. Stark, already distracted by his phone again. "We'll call you."

He slams the door shut. The car takes off.

Peter stands alone on the sidewalk in the waning light, clutching the suitcase and his duffel bag, and not even caring that he is drawing stares in his mask and his Iron Man t-shirt. He watches until the town car disappears.

"They're gonna call me," he says.

The notion wipes out Peter's former embarrassment. Gleeful, he heaves the duffel over his shoulder, adjusts his grip on the suit, and heads in the direction of home.

But it seems Peter's return to New York also signifies the return of the sort of unpredictability he is accustomed to:

They never do call him.

Alone

Two Months Later

“Another phone card?” says Mr. Delmar as Peter, leaving his morning shift, slaps his weekly purchase on the counter. “Are you running some sorta back-room side gig, Parker? ‘Cuz if that’s the case, I gotta warn you, Alejandro uses our back room for ballet practice Wednesday nights.”

Alejandro, who is slicing ham behind the counter, throws a middle finger over his shoulder without turning around.

“*This* is my side gig,” says Peter, digging a wad of crumpled ones out of his jeans—the ones Mr. Stark gave him—and forking them over, trying to ignore the familiar pang that comes with seeing his money return to Mr. Delmar’s cash drawer. He spotted Peter the first few, but even Mr. Delmar’s generosity does not extend to a twenty dollar phone card once a week. “How else am I supposed to talk to people?”

“Could try a real phone. Don’t kids your age love SelfieGram or whatever? Can’t do that on a Tracfone.”

Peter, grinning at *SelfieGram*, tucks the phone card into his backpack.

“See you tomorrow?” he says.

“Secrets, secrets.” Mr. Delmar shakes his head, but doesn’t push any harder. “Get outta here, you delinquent. Get to class. And tell your uncle—”

“I’ll tell him to come by, yeah,” says Peter, already halfway out the door. “Later, Mr. Delmar!”

“For real this time! Or I’ll track him down myself!”

The door closes and Peter, who learned long ago that Mr. Delmar’s threats regarding his uncle are of the empty variety, takes off at a jog.

Down the street and around the corner, Peter disappears down his usual alley, already swinging his backpack off his shoulder. He’s taken to carrying it partly because it’s August, and school is back in session—the better to blend, when he’s in his street clothes—but mainly because it is a convenient place to stash the suit when he isn’t wearing it. Which, granted, isn’t very often these days. Really only when he’s at work.

Peter glances over his shoulder once—it’s still early enough he’s beaten the morning commuters, and the crowds of schoolkids—worms out of his jeans and sweater, and yanks the suit on in its place.

Two months have not muted the thrill of the moment when the suit first tightens to a perfect fit, nor of watching as the systems boot up, a greeting flashing across the internal LCD, and it especially hasn’t muted the thrill of—

“Good morning, Peter. It looks like it’s going to be a beautiful day.”

“Hey, Karen.” Peter grabs the burner phone and phone card, webs his backpack to the back of the nearby dumpster and launches himself onto a fire escape. “Long time no see.”

"You can't really 'see' me, Peter. I'm just a series of codes. And it's actually only been eight hours since we last spoke."

"Figure of speech, Karen." Peter props himself on the railing, overlooking the street, and busies himself with loading the card onto the phone. "You'll catch on to those someday. Maybe."

Is it strange that Peter named the AI in his suit after the one sort-of adult who actually stuck up for him in the last year and a half? Maybe, but at the time it seemed as natural as anything. He associates the Karen from the halfway house with kindness. He associates the Karen in his suit with not feeling so alone.

He was wary at first, of course. Having an AI in his suit is like having a wearable spy, and there's not a single thing about Peter that Karen doesn't have access too. His vitals, his activities... his age. Naturally Peter's first reaction when he realized what Mr. Stark meant by his little "upgrade" was deep suspicion, which was why the first thing he asked Karen, before he'd even named her, was how much she reported back to Mr. Stark.

"All of my abilities to transmit outgoing messages have been turned off," said Karen cheerfully. "I'm just here to talk."

And—fair enough. Peter did say he liked to process out loud. And he fully recognizes that Mr. Stark could have programmed Karen to lie about the transmissions, but considering the fact that no one from CPS has swooped into his warehouse while he's sleeping to cart him back to Skip's, it's a fair bet Karen is telling the truth.

So he and Karen talk. They talk during the day when he is on patrol. They talk at night, when he is lying under the foreman's desk, counting the minutes and waiting for sleep to finally arrive. They talk in between, sometimes. Because sometimes—even though he hates to admit it—Peter just wants to talk to someone.

It's almost like having a friend again.

A friend, granted, who—just as Karen says—has no face, no body, and is annoyingly poorly-versed in certain human practices. Like figures of speech. And privacy.

Speaking of—

"Your scan this morning indicates you slept fewer than five hours last night," says Karen, and Peter, who knows her pretty well at this point, can hear the chiding behind her usual chipperness. "I'm pretty sure that's not enough."

"Can we like, start holding off on the invasive scans until mid-afternoon, Karen? It'd be nice to uh, get my bearings before you start irradiating my insides."

"Can do," Karen chirps.

"Aha!" The phone is loaded. Peter chucks the card at the dumpster below—it hits its target with a clang—and jabs the number two on his speed dial. He presses the phone to his ear and it rings just twice before cutting to voicemail.

"You have reached the voicemail box of Happy Hogan."

The phone beeps.

"Happy!" Peter's voice squeaks a little. He clears his throat. "Happy, hey. Oh, shoot—it's early,

sorry. I'm just calling because my phone has been off and I wanted to make sure I didn't, you know, miss anything from Mr. Stark while it was, um, out of commission. Anyway, I'm back now and I'm patrolling today so if you need me you can just call me or text me or—you know, whatever works. So... yeah. I'm around." He's about to hang up, but he lifts the phone back to his ear at the last second and adds, "Oh—this is Spider-Man, by the way. From Germany."

Peter flips the phone shut.

"Karen," he says. "On a scale of one to ten, how stupid did that just sound?"

"I don't have a good metric for measuring stupidity in my programming, Peter. Shall I find one to download?"

Peter sighs.

"Negative, Karen," he says, tucking the burner phone into his boot. "Let's just do this thing."

Her methods might be invasive, but Karen's conclusion is, as usual, correct: Peter did not sleep much last night. It's partly the heat and humidity—uncomfortable, to be sure, but compared to the halfway house, where he was sleeping around this time last year, it's positively luxurious: at least the foreman's office at his warehouse has windows that open. Mostly it was the anticipation of the phone card, and the possibility that this time, maybe, Happy will call back. Let Peter know he's needed.

One card a week. Twenty bucks, every Friday morning. That's two and a half days worth of meals, but so far Peter has made it work: if he dips into his stash of food once or twice during the week and skips a meal or two on Sundays—a low crime day, so he doesn't need as much energy anyway—he can easily make it work. Sure, the stash is dwindling a little, but the stash is mostly a result of him being crazy anyway, a concession to the ghoul's whispered demands. And when he thinks of it that way, isn't it kind of a *good* thing he's able to ignore the orders from the insane little voice in his head? Doesn't that mean he's getting better?

(And okay, he's slipped up a few times, bought himself a sandwich or a bag of gummy worms on the days he's supposed to be saving. So the stack of cash is dwindling too. Just a little. And yes, those are the days the ghoul's whisper rises to a scream, the days it takes all of Peter's efforts to convince it—to convince *himself*—it will all be worth it in the end. But it will. Because Mr. Stark is going to call eventually.)

Lack of sleep is okay though. He's not nearly as tired as he was during the worst of it at Skip's, and what his body lacks in melatonin, it more than makes up for in adrenaline. Because today, he has his phone.

In the morning, Peter stops a car thief. Sort of. It turns out the guy had just locked his keys in his own car, but Peter leaves that part out of his report when he calls Happy again around lunchtime. He also leaves out the three hours he spends riding the el train back and forth, listening for criminals but staring at his phone, playing snake—the only game available on flip phones, apparently—sending occasional texts, and waiting for a call. Peter *does* tell him about the Puerto Rican lady he gave directions to, and the churro she bought him—free dinner!—but he immediately regrets it as soon as he hangs up. Childish. If he wants Mr. Stark to ask for his help

again, he can't go around acting like a little kid, excited about a pastry. So he calls again, one more time, and reminds Happy about the car thief. And that he's available if they need him.

By the time dusk descends, the adrenaline has worn off, and the four-ish hours of sleep, plus the fact that he's only had a churro to eat all day long, is starting to catch up with him. As much as he wants to stay out, to find something more impressive than a lost old lady to report, his body has other ideas: he's starting to get the all-over queasy feeling that only happens when he's pushed himself just a little too hard. That, in combination with the fact that Karen has been reminding him of his own fatigue ever since she performed another scan in the early afternoon, finally pushes Peter to call it a day. He sends one last text, tucks the phone in his boot, and starts to make his way back to the alley where he left his backpack, crawling along walls and leaping between rooftops to avoid onlookers.

Just as he is approaching the alley, the phone starts to ring.

Peter nearly falls off the building he's currently stuck to in his haste to extract it from his boot.

"Hello? Happy? Hello?"

"Thirty two."

"What? Happy, I can't really hear you, is that—"

"Thirty two," says Happy again, louder this time. "That's how many text messages I have from you. Do you know how many messages I like to have on my phone at any given time, Spider-Man?"

"I—"

"Zero. I like to have zero. Are you trapped underneath a train somewhere? Did someone set off a nuclear bomb in Midtown that I somehow didn't hear about? Because those are the only scenarios I can think of where I should have thirty two text messages from you in one day. So you tell me: do I need to call in the National Guard?"

Peter feels himself go violently red. Overkill.

"Sorry," he says, "I just—my phone was—has been—um, broken, and I wanted to make sure I didn't—"

"You didn't miss a message, kid. What part of 'we'll call you' was unclear?"

"But I just—"

"If Tony Stark wants to get in touch with you, he'll find a way to get in touch. So you can stop blowing up my phone like a schoolgirl with a crush, got it? We good? Okay."

"Wait! I just wanted to—"

But before he can finish the line goes dead. Peter thinks Happy hung up on him until he looks down at the phone and sees *PLEASE RELOAD* splashed across the screen.

"Crap!" says Peter. "How did that happen?"

"I think you talked too much," says Karen.

Peter wrinkles his nose, but there is no one there to see it. As Karen has pointed out, she's just a

series of codes.

“Yeah,” he says, “thanks, K.”

“I’m here to help.”

Peter glances up. On the horizon, night continues its descent. He really should get back to the warehouse before it’s too dark, have a small snack and try to catch up on the sleep he missed last night, but his heart is still thrilling: that was the first time Happy ever called him back. And because he couldn’t rein himself in for like four hours, the call got dropped before he even got to say anything important.

Delmar’s is only a block away.

(You’re being stupid, Peter. Did you not just hear what Happy said? They don’t want you. They never did.)

Peter shakes his head. If they didn’t want him, why bring him to Germany in the first place? Why tell him he did a great job, that they were going to call him?

He forces doubt to the back of his mind, and makes his way toward Delmar’s.

Still, *(stupid)* plays over and over in his head as he approaches the spot where his backpack is, thankfully, still webbed to the dumpster. He removes it, digs to the bottom for the few extra dollars he always keeps there in case of emergency. Counts out twenty.

(Wasteful. You’re being irrational again.)

But before he can tell the voice to shut up, it is drowned out by an equally unconscious but far more powerful sensation:

Every hair on Peter’s body stands up at once.

Peter drops the backpack and turns around, darting for the mouth of the alley just as four male voices drift into it. They are speaking in low whispers, too quiet for anyone without Peter’s super hearing to pick up on from such a distance. The reason for the whispering is quickly apparent: all four men are wearing masks.

They are headed for the bank across the street from the bodega.

“Finally,” Peter says, “something good.”

“I’m not sure I’d classify four armed thieves as ‘good,’ Peter.”

“Figure of speech, Karen. We have got to work on those.” Peter mounts the wall once more, slings a web, swings across the street. “Not good as in, ‘Oh, great, I love bank robberies.’ Good as in, ‘Oh great, I’ll finally have something to report to Happy that isn’t totally lame.’ Try to keep up.”

“I thought Happy said *not* to keep texting him.”

Peter elects not to reply to that.

This turns out to be a good choice, because as soon as Peter creeps into the bank, clinging to the ceiling upside-down, all of his attention is swallowed by the robbers.

It should be an easy deal. He’s taken down robbers before, and many of them have been armed.

Hell, his very first bust as Spider-Man was a pair of armed robbers, and he got away from that with nothing worse than a tiny scratch.

But then, those guys didn't have alien weapons.

Which, when the guy wearing the Hulk mask freaking *levitates Peter onto the ceiling*, he starts to think these guys might.

"This feels really weird!" he shouts, to no one in particular, loose hundred-dollar bills flying through the air around him while the gropes for purchase on—anything. His fingers find the ceiling, and he slings a web, managing to one guy's weapon and fling it out of his hands. "What the heck is going—"

"Their weapons seem to contain Chitauri energy cores," says Karen cheerfully. "They're highly explosive. You might want to consider disarming them."

"Chitauri? As in giant, city-destroying alien Chitauri? *Those* Chitauri?"

Peter ducks as one of the guys uses the hover-thing to lob an ATM at him.

"Are there other Chitauri? I can check my database."

"No—Karen—just—oh, shit."

Too late, Peter realizes Karen was right once again: he should have been quicker about disarming them. Unfortunately, he only realizes this when the guy in the Hulk mask does something to his weapon to turn it from a *this-feels-really-weird* hover thingie into a *holy-shit-it's-a-death-ray* thingie.

A death ray that is pointed directly at Peter.

Peter dodges right as it goes off. There is a deafening burst of energy as the weapon deploys, missing Peter but slicing through the bank window and—*right through Mr. Delmar's*.

Peter barely registers that the thieves are getting away. He runs right past them, out of the bank and across the street, where he leaps through the smoking gash in the bodega's front window. There is a terrifying moment where all he can see and smell is ash, and all he can hear is the crack and crumble as pieces of the walls break off and tumble to the ground—and then he hears Mr. Delmar cough. Eyes watering, Peter follows the sound to the front counter, where he finds his unwitting boss crouched under the cash register and, without waiting for acknowledgement, heaves Mr. Delmar's arm over his shoulder and drags him out of the store, pausing just long enough to grab the cat, too.

Only once they are on the sidewalk does Peter even register what just happened.

"Oh my God." He helps Mr. Delmar sit on the curb, hands the cat to him. "Oh my God, Mr. Delmar, are you okay?"

The moment it's out of his mouth Peter realizes he—Spider-Man—isn't supposed to know Mr. Delmar's name. He flinches—feels himself blanch under the suit—but Mr. Delmar just waves a hand at him, still coughing.

"Go," he says. "I'm fine. Catch those guys. I already called the cops."

Peter hesitates, but only for a second—just long enough to have Karen run a scan on Mr. Delmar

and confirm that he is, in fact, fine.

Then he runs off.

He does not, however, go after the thieves. Not only are they long gone, Peter is also shaking too hard to even think about pursuing them: he makes it less than a block and rounds the corner into the same alley that holds his backpack, the same alley from which he first heard the thieves, and then he collapses against the nearest wall.

“Holy shit, Karen,” he says, yanking his mask up over his mouth and nose so he can take a breath, but leaving his ears and eyes covered. “I just blew up a building.”

“Technically the thieves blew up a building,” says Karen. “But I did warn you about the explosives.”

“How did they get those weapons?” Peter says. He’s mostly talking to himself now. He can’t stop shaking. “I thought all the Chitauri stuff got cleaned up years ago. Where did those things come from?”

“I don’t know. Artifacts related to the cleanup are kept in a secure facility outside of Washington DC, but only government employees with high-level clearance are supposed to have access.”

“Those guys were *not* government employees.”

“Avengers also have access. The ones who haven’t been blacklisted anyway.”

“They also definitely weren’t Avengers. I don’t care how convincing that Iron Man mask was.” Peter’s heart somehow figures out a way to beat harder. “Oh shit. Iron Man. The phone!”

His fingers are clumsy with adrenaline and hunger; they bump and stumble along the edge of his boot, but when he finally manages to tuck them inside, they brush against the hard lump of the phone. It is still there. Still intact. Peter starts to sigh, relieved—

And then it hits him. The adrenaline rushes out of him in a swirling vortex.

The building he just blew up was Mr. Delmar’s bodega.

Mr. Delmar’s bodega is where Peter *works*.

Peter just lost his job.

“Oh no,” he whispers. “Oh no, oh no.”

“Peter? Are you okay? Your heart rate just increased. You should—”

Peter staggers to his feet. He doesn’t mean to, but he’s not thinking: the alley seems to be shrinking, the walls of the buildings drawing closer together. How much money does he have left? How much food?

(Not enough to last three years.)

“Peter, I think you need to—”

What does he do now? What does he do if he can’t work? There’s nowhere else in the city that will give him a job, at least not without his parents’ permission, or some sort of background check, and his parents are dead and all anyone who looks into his background is going to see is that he’s a

runaway, and when they see that they'll take him back, back to CPS, back to Skip—

(can't go there don't think it too close—)

—and what was he thinking, putting all his chips on this one job, which was a fluke in the first place? What was he thinking when he bought those sandwiches, those phone cards, like those things were easy, like they were nothing? What was—

“Peter!”

The uncharacteristic note of panic in Karen's voice is what snaps Peter back to himself. The dark edge he didn't realize was crowding out his vision disappears, and Peter blinks.

He is not in the alley anymore.

He's on a rooftop. He doesn't know how long he was gone for, but it must have been a while: not only has the sky deepened from purple to black—or as black as it ever gets in New York City—he can also tell right away he is no longer in Queens. He must have run for it after he blacked out, a notion which is almost as frightening as the reason he blacked out in the first place. Peter has had these attacks before, the most recent being the near-freakout he had in the hotel room in Germany, but he has never lost such a big stretch of time before, has never become a passenger in his own body while his mind surrendered to the darkness.

Scarier still is the fact that he recognizes where his body has taken him.

It's not somewhere he wants to be.

Peter sinks to a crouch and puts his head between his knees. He should leave, fast, but while his body is no longer running the show, it also hasn't really handed the reins over. He is shaking so hard he can barely hold his own weight.

It takes him a long time to realize someone is speaking to him.

“—nine forty-five pm. You're standing on a rooftop near Midtown. Nearly everyone nearby is asleep. You're not in any danger. It's nine forty-five pm. You're standing on a rooftop—”

“Karen?” Peter croaks.

Karen stops her calm recitation.

“Hey Peter,” she says. “Are you okay? You were unresponsive for nearly thirty minutes.”

“I just—” Peter swallows, embarrassment rising even though he knows there is no one to be embarrassed for. “I think I freaked out a little.”

“That's okay,” says Karen gently. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Peter shakes his head. Tears are rising to the corners of his eyes, but he blinks them back, forces a quavering laugh. “Sorry, Karen. That was—that's never happened before. Not that bad. I'm usually—”

His voice catches in his throat. *I'm usually stronger than that*, he meant to say. But is it true? Because after the events of tonight, he's not sure he was ever strong.

Foolish. Reckless. Wasteful. But not strong.

What is he going to do now?

“Peter?”

Karen’s voice is still gentle. Almost nervous.

“I’m okay,” Peter says. “I’m okay.”

He’s not sure even he believes it.

“Peter, do you want to go home? I can set a course for the warehouse. I think you might need some sleep.”

Peter starts to nod. He suddenly feels half-present in his body, the way he does only when he is verging on unconsciousness. But he stops himself at the last second.

He came here for a reason. Even if he didn’t know it at the time.

“In a minute, Karen. I need to check on something first.”

If Peter had been behaving rationally, or even semi-rationally, he knows he never would have come here. This is not a place he associates with safety—quite the opposite—and so the fact that his body carried him here while he was in his mid-panic-attack fugue state is... concerning, to say the least. Concerning, but not completely impossible to understand.

His danger signals were going haywire. It makes sense, in a twisted sort of way, that his subconscious would send him to make sure the only people left in the world that he really cares about—really *loves*, anyway—are still okay.

Once he can hold himself steady again, Peter slips down the side of the building and drops onto the fire escape.

Lily and Emma’s room is dark. Their window is cracked open just slightly, like it is most nights, and through this crack Peter can hear the soft sound of the girls’ breathing. Just like, two windows away, he can hear Skip breathing too.

Skip is asleep. It’s just like Karen said. Peter is safe.

Lily is asleep too. Peter can tell from the even rhythm of her breaths, and the way the slight shadow of her body lies still against the soft light filtering out of the hallway underneath their bedroom door. And Emma—

Sits up as soon as he looks at her. Like she knew he was there. Like she was waiting for him.

Or maybe she just wasn’t asleep yet. Either way, Peter feels grateful—pathetically, miserably grateful—when she quietly slips out of bed and pads over to the window.

She pushes it open. Just enough he can see the pale moon of her face in its entirety as she frowns at him.

“You’re here the wrong day.” Emma yawns. “Why? Are you going to help your friends again?”

It takes a minute for Peter to regain his composure enough to speak. Karen is one thing—someone to talk to, someone he is eternally, unswervingly glad to have—but she is still only an AI. Emma is real. He didn’t realize how much he needed that until she is gazing up at him, her small round face as placid and curious as ever. There’s no accusation, no reprimand in her expression. She just wants

to know why he's here.

He misses her. He misses Lily, too.

He can't let it show. So Peter swallows, and he forces a smile into his voice when he responds.

"No," he says. "I was just really excited to see you. But you're supposed to be asleep."

"Sometimes I don't sleep so good," says Emma mildly.

"Yeah? Me neither. But you know you don't have anything to be scared of, right? I'm always looking out for you."

"Even when you're not here?"

"Especially when I'm not here. That's when I'm out catching bad guys."

"Does Peter come with you?"

Peter swallows. "Sometimes. But not tonight."

"Is he ever gonna see us again?"

"I hope so. I'll tell him you say hi, okay?"

"Okay." Emma's eyelids droop. As quickly as her curiosity rose, it dips now, sated by Peter's non-explanatory explanation. "Tell him we miss him."

"He misses you too. You should go to bed, sleepyhead."

Emma nods, and starts to walk back to her bed.

"Emma?"

She pauses, turns back around with heavy-lidded acquiescence.

"Is—is your dad—?"

"He's always nice to us," says Emma. "'Night, Spider-Man."

She walks back and, not unkindly, closes the window.

Still, Peter remains on the fire escape a moment longer, watching her shadow until it climbs back into bed and then swallowing hard over and over until the lump in his throat lessens, and only then does he get to his feet, mount the wall, and climb back onto the building's roof.

It shouldn't be so hard coming back here. He's free now. He's Spider-Man.

But it always is.

And today, Peter lost his job.

He takes a shuddering breath. It's time to go home. To *his* home—the warehouse. He needs to regroup. He needs a plan of action. He needs—

"Oh *shit!*"

Just as Peter is about to leap off the roof, Iron Man rises out of nowhere, directly in front of him.

“Hey, Spider-Man,” says Mr. Stark. “Who’s Peter?”

The Reveal

Peter stumbles back. His foot catches on a crack in the cement; he falls on his backside, but he's too stunned to get back up: he just sits on the roof, gaping up as the Iron Man suit lands in front of him.

"What?"

It takes him a second to recognize that *he* is the one who just spoke. There seems to be some problem in the wiring between his mouth and his brain.

"Always with the eloquent greetings," says Mr. Stark. "But honestly, I think we know each other well enough at this point to dispense with the niceties. So I ask again: who's Peter?"

"Who?"

Definitely a problem in the wiring. Peter isn't being flippant. He genuinely can't tell what Mr. Stark is talking about. It only lasts a moment, though. Then he remembers—*he* is Peter. That's *his* name, coming out of the Iron Man suit. His *real* name.

"Not that the monosyllabism isn't a welcome relief after the messages Happy's been forwarding me all day, but I feel like I should probably ask if your brain is broken. Bank explosions can sometimes do that."

This time the hum of encroaching panic, rather than blacking out his vision, lends clarity. His thoughts thunk into place. He scrambles to his feet.

"You tracked me," he says. "You said you wouldn't do that."

"Uh, I think my exact words were 'the tracker is emergency-activated,'" says Mr. Stark. He is sounding less amused by the second. He hasn't gotten out of the suit. "You blew up two buildings and then your heart rate spiked so high I thought FRIDAY was piping a John Bonham solo into my earpiece when I first heard it. I realize the word 'emergency' has sort of a nebulous connotation in this line of work, but I figured it was better to hedge my bets. But look—you're alive. Hooray."

Peter doesn't miss the irony, nor what it means: Mr. Stark was clearly expecting a warmer greeting than what he received. Peter is surprised at himself, too. This is what he's been waiting for for weeks, but rather than pleased he feels...

Angry. The same way he felt the day he blew up at Ned. And when Michelle cornered him by the drinking fountain.

(He's got you cornered, Peter. He knows your name.)

"You promised you wouldn't try to figure out who I am," he says. "That was the deal. I held up my end, man, so what gives you the right to follow me out here, huh? This is my business, it isn't—"

"Woah, hey. What? What happened to Mr. *Call Me if You Need Me*? I'm not backing out on our deal, kid. I told you about the trackers. Don't accuse me of not being on the up-and-up, only one of us here refuses to take off the mask."

Mr. Stark's voice is no longer oozing with irony. It sounds irritated—not as angry as Peter's, but getting there. The edge of it makes Peter's breath catch, and the slight fear it inspires makes

something that should have been clear from the beginning clear now:

Mr. Stark said *Who's Peter*.

Not, *Hey, Peter*.

Who.

Peter slumps.

"Oh, shit," he says again. "Shit, man—sir. Mr. Stark. I'm really sorry. I just—you showed up and I really wasn't expecting it, and I was already on edge because of—because of the whole bank thing, and I just—"

Peter really doesn't mean to—he is, in fact, focusing all his energy on *not* betraying the fact that all of the fight has just drained out of him in one massive rush—but he staggers a little.

Mr. Stark catches him.

Peter straightens right away, steps back. He doesn't feel unsafe—maybe it's ironic, considering the suit is basically a wearable weapon, but when Mr. Stark is in it he feels less threatening—but he doesn't want Mr. Stark to see how close he is to falling over.

"I'm fine," he says. "I'm fine."

"I can see that." Nevertheless, Mr. Stark steps back, gives Peter his space. "Suit says you're not injured. Not physically, anyway. You been doing okay there, Spider-Man?"

Peter starts to shake his head automatically, but catches himself. He nods. "You just caught me on a bad night. Sorry."

Horribly, he feels his eyes fill with tears. Luckily they're hidden by the mask, but he still blinks them away, furious with himself. Two months of waiting and *this* is how he reacts to Mr. Stark showing up?

But Mr. Stark just nods.

"I get those sometimes. Wanna talk about it?"

Peter shakes his head.

"Okay. Then can we talk about the fact that it's ten thirty on a Friday night and you're peeping through some little girls' window? Don't get me wrong, Spidey, I'm a fan of all kinds of debauchery, but this one's a bad look no matter how you slice it."

"Oh, God. No. *No*. That's—it's not like that at all. I know them, I just—"

"Relax. *Relax*, it was a joke. Clearly the kid wasn't afraid of you. I'm just pointing out how it might look to someone without my inside information, okay? So—third time's the charm, I'm hoping: who is Peter?"

(You're caught, idiot. Give it up, you're going back.)

Calm, Peter tells himself, firmly, ignoring the other voice. *Stay calm*.

He's not caught yet. It's an unexpected development, but it's not the first time he's had to lie about

who he is. Which is why he has the lie at the ready.

“He’s... just some kid I know. He used to live here.”

“Uh-huh. And now do you wanna fill in the wide gap between *some kid you know* and *sneaking on a five year old’s bedroom window in the middle of the night?*”

“They’re eight.”

“Not helping your case here, Spider-Man.”

And—shit. This part is new. He’s lied to Emma about where Peter is— *who* Peter is, which is him—but he’s never had to lie about why he’s there. An eight year old will readily accept that the superhero at her window is there to protect her. Mr. Stark is more complicated.

Because it’s too late to lie outright: he already knows Peter’s name. But if Peter tells him the truth—tells him why ‘that kid he knows’ ran away in the first place, then what was the point of running away at all? He can’t tell him what Skip did. He still has to protect the girls.

And anyway, why would Mr. Stark believe him?

“It’s... complicated,” says Peter slowly. He can taste his heart in his throat, but his voice is unexpectedly steady. “I don’t know the whole story. I just... run into him every once in a while. And he asked me to check in on them when I get a chance. So I... do.”

“How old is this guy?”

“I... didn’t ask?”

“He’s a kid?”

“Maybe. No. I mean, he *seems* young. But he’s not that young. He seems like he’s, you know, really independent and stuff.”

“And you don’t know anything else about him?”

“Um... should I?”

Mr. Stark is silent for a moment. Even though he hasn’t lifted the faceplate, Peter imagines behind it his face is contemplative, the way it was when they silently ate together in the hotel room in Germany.

“You think those kids are in danger?” says Mr. Stark finally. “Because if they are—”

Peter shakes his head. “No,” he says. “No, they seem fine. It all seems fine. Maybe—maybe he and Sk—his dad just got into a fight or something. I don’t think he gets to see them anymore.”

“And you’re his sibling-visiting proxy, huh? That’s very magnanimous of you, Spider-Man.”

Mr. Stark still sounds concerned. Peter’s heart is still in his throat.

“I’m a magnanimous guy.”

He tries to make it sound like a joke. It falls flat.

Mr. Stark is silent for another moment.

“You haven’t been doing this very long,” he says.

“Long enough. I know what I’m doing, I—I do okay.”

“No offense, kid, but bank explosions are pretty standard fare. The near-heart attack was—”

“It wasn’t anything. I wasn’t scared, I—I overexerted. Went too hard. It won’t happen again, I’m fine.”

“I’m just saying,” says Mr. Stark, “maybe stay close to the ground for a while. Literally—don’t stick your nose into family affairs by creeping around twelfth-story fire escapes in the middle of the night. Just... what about the old lady with the churro? She seemed trustworthy, right? Do more of that.”

Mortification makes Peter’s heart drop out of his throat and into his abdomen, where it shrivels in his stomach acid to a withered lump.

“I’m fine,” he says again. “I handle myself fine. You didn’t have to come all the way out here, Mr. Stark, I’ve got everything under control.”

“Oh, I’m not—here.” The faceplate flips up, revealing an empty suit. “WiFi is a wonderful thing, kid. Look, I’m gonna look into all of this, okay? Just—stay away from the weird domestic stuff and the alien weaponry in the meantime. Be a friendly neighborhood Spider-Man, but, you know—not too friendly. Don’t be weird. So—you all good then? Good to go?”

“I’m—yeah.” Peter is still swallowing disappointment from the sight of the empty helmet. “Yeah that’s—oh, wait! The alien weapons! Mr. Stark, Karen said those things were made from Chitauri cores, I think we should—”

“Did I not just say I have it handled? Also—Karen? What did we say about picking better names, Spider-Man?” The suit powers up, hovers a few inches above the flat-top. “Keep your nose down, kid. We’ll be in touch.”

“Wait!” Peter shouts. “But I can help, I can—”

“Mr. Stark is no longer connected,” says a cool female voice from within the helmet.

And the suit blasts off.

As soon as it is out of sight, Peter collapses again. He sits, hands on his head, panting and trying to calm the buzz in his brain and stop it from going full-on blackout again.

“Oh my god,” he says. “Oh my god, that was so close.”

“So close to what?”

Peter jumps. He had almost forgotten Karen was still there.

“Karen!” he hisses. “What the hell? I thought you said you didn’t transmit outgoing messages!”

“I don’t,” says Karen innocently. “The emergency tracker is a separate feature, I don’t have any control over that. If you wanted to turn it off you would either have to ask Mr. Stark or remove it yourself.”

Peter’s head snaps up. “I can remove it?”

“It’s not advisable. The emergency protocols are there for a reason.”

“But I could do it.”

“Not without a significantly powerful computer, but yes. Peter, I think it’s time to go home. You should go to bed.”

Peter ignores her. His heart is in his throat again. *A significantly powerful computer.* He uses the computers at the libraries all the time, but there’s no way any of the libraries has a computer that’s a match for Stark technology as advanced as his suit.

But he knows someone who does.

It’s past eleven by the time Peter finds himself clinging to the wall outside Ned’s seventh-story bedroom window, but his tiredness is gone, washed away by anticipation. This is the closest he has been to Ned in almost five months.

He can hear Ned inside, snoring softly, but he hasn’t looked in the window yet. He doesn’t need to: he knows that snore from dozens of sleepovers, though most of those are distant memories now. The sound cuts straight to Peter’s center.

He shouldn’t be here. Peter knows Ned hates him. He *should* hate him, after everything Peter pulled last winter. In fact, the certainty that Ned despises him has been a weird comfort, on the rare occasions Peter has spotted him outside the bodega. It makes him less tempted to try to speak to him. Reassures him that what he is doing is for the best—both for him and for Ned.

But of all the things Peter gave up to be Spider-Man, this one has still been the hardest.

If it weren’t such a dire situation, Peter wouldn’t be here at all. But the thing tonight was way too close a call. Mr. Stark knows about Emma and Lily. He knows Peter’s name. He might not know that Spider-Man *is* Peter, but that was a very near thing. Ironically, the very indifference Peter has spent two months battling against might be his saving grace this time: Mr. Stark seems too preoccupied to really care, if that empty suit was any indication. And despite the invasion of Peter’s privacy on the rooftop earlier, Mr. Stark *does* still seem like he wants to keep his end of their deal. But thinking about the alternative still makes Peter queasy. What if Mr. Stark decides to follow up, maybe use the trackers for something other than an emergency? And Peter might have talked his way out of it this time, but what if the emergency tracker activates when he’s incapacitated for some reason? Then there will be nothing to stop Mr. Stark from just—taking off the mask.

And that can’t happen.

So here Peter is.

He takes one final steeling breath and peers over the ledge. The room beyond is dark, but just as with the girls Peter can see the outline of Ned’s shape in the bed, just barely visible in the light filtering through the window. He opens it, slowly, and creeps inside.

Once he is standing on the carpet, Peter is struck by the sudden and surreal sense that he has crawled right into one of his own dreams. He never spent much time here—because Ned’s mother

never liked Peter, they mostly spent time at Peter's, first with Ben, later with Skip—but he would come over occasionally, when there was some mother-approved reason AKA a school project, and the nostalgia from those times is so powerful now it almost bowls Peter over. Almost everything about the room is the same, from the Star Wars posters, to the stacks of comic books, to the figure sleeping soundly in the twin bed in the corner. The fact that this world still exists, despite Peter having left it so firmly in the past, is unsettling in all sorts of unexpected ways.

He shakes it off. Ned's laptop is charging on his desk. Peter tiptoes past Ned's sleeping form and gently unplugs it from the wall. It shouldn't take him too long to figure out how to remove the tracker. It would be faster if he had Ned's help, of course, but Peter still has enough faith in his own tech skills he feels certain he can have the computer back before Ned wakes up in the morning. He just has to be—

Peter drops the cord with a thunk.

—*quiet.*

“Mom?”

“I think your friend is awake, Peter,” says Karen.

Peter whirls. Ned is sitting up in his bed, blinking blearily and groping on the nightstand.

“Mom, you promised you weren't gonna come in here without my permission anymore, what are you—”

Ned finds the light switch and turns his lamp on. As soon as his eyes focus on Peter, dressed in full Spider-Man attire and clutching Ned's laptop in one hand, Ned's eyes go wide.

“Oh my god,” he says. “Oh my god. You're the Spider-Man. From YouTube.”

Peter's mind is chanting a string of curse words. But his mouth says something different.

“Uh—halt, citizen!” He holds out a hand, dropping his voice a few octaves even though he is whispering. “I need to commandeer your—um—computing device for... official Avengers business.”

“You're an Avenger?”

Peter flinches.

“I'm—it doesn't matter what I am. I just—I'll bring it back. Just don't tell anyone you saw me.”

Peter starts to make a dash for the window.

“Wait.” Ned is still in his bed, his mouth hanging open, apparently too shocked to move. “Mr. Spider-Man, sir, um, I would totally love to help you out or whatever but see the thing is, my mom got me that laptop and if it goes missing she'll send me to boarding school in Siberia. Is there anyway you could maybe not steal it please? Sir?”

Peter, who has one leg over the windowsill, whispers, “*Shit,*” and turns back.

“Um—don't, don't fear” —Peter flinches again; he sounds like an idiot— “Spider-Man isn't a thief. I said I'll bring it back and so... I will. Just. Hold tight and I'll be back... son.”

A third flinch. He has *got* to get out of here.

But it's not in the stars. Because right as Peter starts to make his way back to the window, Ned starts to yell.

"Mom? Mom? Mo—"

The last shout is cut off, because Peter has leapt across the room to the bed and clapped a hand across Ned's mouth. Ned goes-bug eyed with fear, struggling, and—

What the hell is Peter doing?

It's a split-second decision, a choice made because there *is* no other choice. He can't hold Ned forever. And even though his parents didn't hear him the first time—Peter can hear *them* sleeping down the hall—there will be nothing to stop Ned from getting them as soon as Peter lets him go.

So Peter takes off the mask.

"It's me," he whispers. "Ned, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's just me."

Ned goes absolutely, perfectly still. Peter didn't think it was possible, but his eyes go even wider.

Guilt washes over Peter in a boiling wave.

Slowly, he removes his hand from Ned's mouth. Ned doesn't shout again. He just stares.

"Peter?" he says.

The tears from the rooftop are back. Peter doesn't want Ned to see them. He takes a step back from the bed, into the shadows. The shame he feels is more powerful than it was after the initial fight, more powerful, even, than when he told Ned he didn't want to be friends anymore.

"Yeah," Peter whispers. "Yeah, it's me. Hey, Ned."

There is a pause, then Ned launches himself out of bed. Peter braces himself for a fist he knows he deserves and—

Then Ned is wrapped around him, enveloping him, speaking in his ear.

Peter is stunned. At first, he can't understand what Ned is saying.

"You're alive. You're alive, you're alive, you're alive. You're not dead, you're—" Ned breaks the hug, holds Peter out at arm's length. "You're freaking *Spider-Man*?"

Ned releases him. He turns away, starts pacing.

"I knew it. I *knew* something was up. You had been acting so freaking weird, and everyone said you were just being a jerk, but I *knew* something was wrong, and then you were just gone—*poof!*—and first I thought maybe it was me because you really seemed like you hated me but then I started to think all these other things, awful things, and did you know they made me see the school counselor because of you? I tried to tell her something was up but she wouldn't listen, she just kept calling you troubled, like that was some big character flaw, right, like oh, we should just write off the troubled kids, they're lost causes. So that was BS. And my mom, she said I was better off without you, but to be fair, dude, my mom has always said that about you and it didn't—" He stops pacing and rounds on Peter, who has been watching him rant silently, rooted to his spot at the center of the room. "Where the ever-loving *heck* have you been, Peter? Did you know everyone thinks you're *dead*? Everyone except Flash, who thinks you're like, selling crack on a

street corner or something. How could you do that to me, dude? How could you disappear on me *again?*”

“I—”

There is an explanation ready in Peter’s mouth, but it dies on his tongue. He closes his mouth. Stares at Ned while Ned stares at him, panting from pacing.

Only then does Peter notice Ned is wearing Iron Man pajamas. They are the same ones Lily has, in a much bigger size, of course: a red background with Iron Man’s faceplate splashed asymmetrically all across them. The same faceplate that, less than an hour ago, opened in front of Peter to reveal an empty suit.

Peter snorts. The snort turns into a giggle.

Before he can stop himself, Peter is full-on laughing. He clamps his mouth shut to keep the hysterics from making any sound, but that just makes his sides cramp up, so Peter doubles over, clutching his ribs, then drops to a crouch, then finally sits, burying his face in his hands to stifle himself.

“I’m sorry,” he gasps. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Oh man, I just—I just—”

Abruptly, without warning, the laughter turns to tears.

“I’m sorry,” Peter says again. His hands are still over his face, but this time they are stifling sobs. “I’m sorry, Ned. I know you hate me. You should—you should definitely hate me. I’m sorry I’m here, I’m—”

Ned puts a hand on his back.

It’s just like in the alley, after Ben died, when Peter was still living with the Arlingtons. Except this time when Peter looks up, Ned is not crying. His face contains nothing but concern.

“Peter,” he says, “where have you been?”

Maybe it’s because of what happened at Mr. Delmar’s. Maybe it’s because Peter is still operating on less than four hours of sleep and an empty stomach. Maybe it’s because he just unwittingly took himself back to the worst place he’s ever been and then came within a hair’s width distance of exposing himself to the one person whose respect and admiration he still desperately craves, a person who, it turned out, was not even present for said almost-exposure. Or maybe it’s just because it’s Ned asking, and Peter owes Ned. He owes him anything he wants.

Peter tells him everything.

He tells him about the spider bite. The realization that he has superpowers. He tells him about running away, about his job at Delmar’s, and living at the warehouse. He tells him about meeting Mr. Stark. Flying to Germany. Fighting the Avengers.

He tells him about today.

The only thing Peter doesn’t tell him is what happened with Skip. He thinks about it, but for barely a second. The moment the thought rises, his throat snaps shut.

So he doesn’t say it.

The rest, though, comes out. And then it *is* out. The truth. The truth of who Peter is, what he's done, what he *is* doing—it's all out there, for the first time in months. When it's finished, Peter feels like he has just set down a barbell weighing fifteen tons. The relief is so powerful he sways from it.

Then he looks up, and he sees the expression on Ned's face. Blank. Unreadable. So unlike Ned that Peter is sure it can only conceal some untold anger, *justified* anger, and Peter holds his breath, bracing for it.

"This," says Ned, finally, just when Peter doesn't think he can stand the tension for another second, "is the *greatest night of my life*."

Peter's mouth falls open as Ned leaps to his feet, carding his hands through his hair.

"What?"

"You heard me. Oh my god dude, of all the things—of all the stuff I was imagining—*superpowers*? I've been watching every video of you for months and I didn't even know it! It has actually, ironically, been a major source of comfort in some admittedly shitty times and—woah! The whole time I was feeling sad about you being missing, I was comforting myself by watching videos *of you*! How cool is that! And you know Tony Stark? *Tony Stark* made you that suit? Peter, this is incredible. This is—"

"Ned." Peter finally finds his voice, and his legs. He gets to his feet. "What are you talking about?"

"Um, I'm talking about you being Spider-Man, dude, what are you talking about?"

"I yelled at you," says Peter. It hurts, but he feels like he has to, because clearly Ned has some sort of selective amnesia, and Peter doesn't deserve to get off this easy. "I said terrible things and then I just disappeared. You should hate me right now, you know that right?"

"Oh, totally," says Ned. "I did hate you—well, sort of. The counselor said a lot of stuff about how hate and love are two sides of the same coin, but whatever, the point is I totally hated your guts for a while. But I always *missed* you. You're my best friend, dude. And besides, that was all before I knew you were going through spider puberty when you freaked out. Developing superpowers is a completely valid excuse for losing your shit. I mean—"

He gestures at the Hulk poster on the wall.

Peter decides now might not be the best time to point out he did not yet have his powers when he flipped on Ned in the lunchroom. Ned, spent from excitement, drops to sit on his bed, and Peter takes a step toward him.

But he can't think of anything to say.

For a second, Ned just sits there, grinning to himself. But as his breathing slows the grin fades, until he is frowning just a little bit, his brow slightly furrowed. This looks more like the expression Peter expected, so when Ned looks up again, he braces himself once more.

"Peter." Ned's voice sounds more serious now. "Why didn't you call me?"

Peter fiddles with his gloves. He doesn't notice he's doing it until Ned reaches across the space between them and pries his hands apart. Peter lets them fall to his sides.

Ned gestures to the spot on the bed next to him. Peter sits, a little uncertain, and looks at his hands.

“I wanted to,” he says. “I thought about it all the time. But after everything I had already put you through... it didn’t seem very fair, you know?”

“You always *do* that.” Now Ned sounds frustrated. “You act like you’re such a huge burden, Peter, but when have I *ever* said I don’t want you around? When have I *ever* said it was too hard to be your friend?”

Peter shakes his head without looking up.

“I don’t deserve it, Ned. I don’t deserve you being nice to me. And if you ever got hurt because of this stuff, I would never—”

“Peter.”

Peter looks up. Ned’s face is hard, serious. Like it was when he told Peter it wasn’t his fault Ben died.

“The worst thing that ever happened to me was not knowing what happened to *you*,” says Ned. “You don’t want me to get hurt? Stop cutting me out, dude. Simple.”

Peter holds Ned’s gaze for a moment, then reaches into his boot. He pulls out the burner phone.

“I always kept it,” he says, handing it to Ned, wiping a stray tear as he does. “I know I never called you, but... I always had it with me.”

Ned flips the phone open, gazes down at the inked-in panic button for a long time.

“Peter,” he says. “Why did you have to run away? Why couldn’t you have stayed at Skip’s *and* been Spider-Man?”

Now Ned looks up. There is something new in his eyes, something Peter immediately recognizes as fear. He’s afraid of what Peter is going to say.

Which is exactly why Peter can’t say it.

He forces a smile.

“I got superpowers, dude. Skip would never have let me do this stuff if he knew people tried to kill me every night. And I” —the smile slips— “I have to do this, Ned. I don’t know if I can explain it. But I have to.”

Ned considers him for a moment. Then he nods. Flips the phone shut and hands it back to Peter.

“Stay here tonight,” he says.

“What? Ned, I can’t—what are you doing?”

Ned has gotten to his feet and crossed the room to the closet, where he pulls out an armful of blankets and spare pillows.

“Stay,” he says, and this time it sounds more like a command. “And in the morning, I’ll help you with your super awesome, Tony-Stark-made suit. But that’s my price. You have to spend the night, and you have to hang out with me tomorrow. Or no deal.”

Ned stands in front of Peter, his face barely visible over the armful of bedding but set into an unconvincing-but-determined look of sternness nonetheless. Peter doubts Ned would be able to keep his hands off the suit if he tried, but...

But Ned has already surprised him tonight. Many times.

"What about your mom?" Peter says.

Ned grins, drops the blankets on the floor, and starts to arrange them into a bed.

"You won't believe it, dude, but I have a lock on my door now."

"For real?"

"For real. It was the one good thing to come out of counseling. The counselor convinced her she was stunting my emotional growth by not letting me have my personal space, it was amazing. She totally didn't want to do it, but my dad made her. And okay, there's a key and stuff, but my dad hides it from her and she only finds it every once in a while. She hasn't been in here in weeks." He finishes making the bed. "I'll take the floor. You want pajamas? How comfortable is that thing? I bet it's pretty comfortable, because, you know, Tony Stark, but I have to be honest, you're a little ripe, dude. I wish I could sneak you into the shower but—"

"I'll take pajamas. And I'll sleep on the floor."

"That's okay, you must—"

"I like the floor," says Peter firmly, sliding off the bed to prove his point.

Ned shrugs.

"Suit yourself. Grab what you like."

Ten minutes later the lights are off again. Peter is lying on the floor, blankets drawn up to his chin, staring at the glow-in-the-dark star decals on Ned's ceiling, arranged in the shape of Orion's Belt. Ned is lying above him, doing the same.

Peter has no idea how he got here. But he doesn't, at the moment, have the energy to question the feeling in his chest, which is warm and a little painful at the same time.

It feels like if happiness and sadness could exist at once, and side-by-side.

Maybe they can.

"Peter?"

Ned rolls over, looks down at him.

"Yeah?"

"I'm really glad you're alive, dude."

Peter swallows, hard. He's exhausted, wracked with disbelief at the events of the day. He doesn't think he could lie if he wanted to. But even he is surprised by the truth that emerges from his mouth when he replies.

"Me too, dude. Me too."

A Different World

Peter wakes when a slice of sunlight falls directly across his face. He doesn't open his eyes right away. For once, his comforter is not absolutely stifling; normally it's so hot and humid in the foreman's office that he just lies on top of it until sometime in the small hours of the morning, when it is finally cool enough to crawl back underneath. But today must be unseasonably cold, because he is tucked comfortably within it, and he can't remember waking up in the middle of the night. Peter rolls over, thinking he might try to catch up on some of the sleep he missed, wondering how angry Mr. Delmar will be if he is late for his shift...

And as soon as he moves, the memory of the day before comes rushing up to meet him. The phone card, the explosion at Mr. Delmar's, nearly being caught by Mr. Stark. And—

Peter sits up abruptly, and whacks his head on the underside of Ned's bed.

Groaning, hand pressed to his throbbing forehead, Peter disentangles himself from the blankets on the floor and stands up. He is in Ned's bedroom. Ned is in the bed beside him, still asleep, even though the sharpness of the sunlight cutting through the window, still open from when Peter crawled through it last night, suggests morning has already come and gone. Sure enough, when he glances at the alarm clock on Ned's nightstand it is 12:30pm.

"*Shit*," Peter whispers.

He grabs Ned's shoulder, shakes him. Ned rolls over, blinking blearily, but the haze of sleep is quickly replaced by relief.

"Oh, good," he says, yawning. "You're still here. I thought it was gonna be a dream or something."

"Ned," says Peter, "we way overslept, man, it's past noon."

Ned glances at the clock, totally unperturbed. He yawns again.

"It's Saturday," he says.

His eyes start to slide closed. Peter shakes him again.

"*Ned*. Dude, your mom is gonna—"

"It's fine, it's fine." Still, Ned sits up, stretches. "I always sleep past noon on Saturday. That's what Saturdays are for."

Peter blinks. The only reason he keeps track of the days of the week anymore is so he knows what night to visit the girls; beyond that, it doesn't make a difference if it's a weekend or weekday.

He hasn't slept past sunrise in over five months.

Peter looks down. He looks tiny, dressed in a pair of Ned's sweatpants and his Midtown High gym t-shirt, but besides the fact that he doesn't exactly cut an intimidating figure, he feels better than he has felt in weeks, at least physically. Hungry, sure, but Peter is always hungry. Usually, that hunger comes along with exhaustion.

When he looks back up, feeling a little dazed, Ned is getting out of bed, shuffling around the room picking up the bedding, removing evidence of Peter's unsanctioned sleepover. As he stuffs the

blankets away, he says,

“Okay. We obviously can’t do this thing here. My mom is gonna wonder why I haven’t emerged from my room eventually, and it’s not like I can tell her Spider-Man crawled through my window in the middle of the night. So here’s the plan. I’ll go make up some school project or study session or something, you sneak *out* through the window, we meet at a second location. Yes?”

The dazed feeling intensifies. Ned is talking to him like it’s the most normal thing in the world, like the universe didn’t get turned on its head yesterday.

Peter says, “What?”

“Our deal,” says Ned happily. Now he is getting dressed. “You have to hang out with me, and I have to help you with your suit.” He points at the suit, draped across the foot of his bed, and groans longingly, but doesn’t touch. It looks like an effort, but Peter knows what Ned is doing; he’s holding Peter to his word.

Peter shakes himself, trying to shake away the sense of surreality that comes from waking up in an air-conditioned apartment, with his best friend beside him. It takes some serious focus, but some of the dazedness lifts. Peter starts to smile; Ned is waiting, watching him eagerly, innocently. Like he doesn’t care where Peter has been—like all that matters is that Peter is standing in front of him now.

Peter feels a rush of affection so powerful he has to work for a few moments before he trusts himself enough to speak without his voice cracking.

“Okay,” he says. “Where should we meet?”

“Can we meet at your warehouse? Is it like a secret lair, like the Bat Cave? Do you have other gadgets there? Did Mr. Stark make you, like, a Spider-Cycle? Can I see it?”

“A—what?”

“I don’t know. Like a motorcycle, but with a spider logo on the side. And it shoots venom or something. Wait, do *you* shoot venom?”

“Ned. No. And when have you ever seen Spider-Man on a motorcycle?”

“I don’t know dude, I don’t know what you’ve been doing all this time. Can you grow an extra set of arms?”

“Ned. *No.* ”

“How about like, spider mind control? Can you summon an army of spiders?”

“Ned.” Peter crosses the room, grabs him by the shoulders. “Focus, please. What were you saying about the suit?”

Ned takes a deep breath.

“We need somewhere with electricity,” he says. “And WiFi, preferably. And somewhere no one is gonna bother us.”

“That rules out the warehouse,” says Peter. “Uh—no WiFi.”

He doesn’t mention that he does not have electricity, either. Or running water. Peter loves his

makeshift shelter—for him, the warehouse means safety—but he has the feeling from the way Ned is talking his friend is imagining something very different from the dilapidated file cabinets and ratty nest of blankets piled under the mouldering desk that Peter calls home.

It feels good, for once, to have someone think that Peter is in charge, in control. Not only does he not want to lose that, he also doesn't want to give Ned any reason to question the story Peter fed him last night.

He doesn't want Ned to question the reason Peter decided to leave Skip's. And if he sees the truth of how Peter is living...

"The library," says Peter firmly. "The main branch, on Fifth."

Ned raises an eyebrow.

"That's kind of a haul, Peter."

Peter grips Ned's shoulders a little tighter. "Ned, you know how happy I am to have you back, right?"

"Yes," says Ned. "And you're also super lucky to have me. *You* know *that*, right?"

Ned is grinning cheekily, like this whole thing is a wildly fun ride, like the roller coasters on Coney Island, where Ben used to take them during the summer: thrilling, but not actually dangerous. It makes Peter want to smile too, but he suppresses the urge. Because this *is* serious, and it is dangerous: it is why he didn't want to tell Ned in the first place. One of the reasons, anyway.

"I am lucky, dude," he says. "But listen, if you're gonna do this with me, we have to be *careful*, okay? Nobody knows who I am except you. Even Mr. Stark doesn't know I'm a kid, and if he did... Look, the point is, we have to be stealthy. We can't hang out anywhere we might be recognized, got it?"

Ned's face, far from losing its enthusiastic glow, brightens even further.

"Secret mission," he says. "*Awesome*. Yes. Okay. Stealth, I love it. So—you get a head start and I'll take the train and meet you in like, a couple hours. Hey—" He grabs Peter's arm, because Peter has already started to turn away, reaching for the suit. "Can I be your guy in the chair?"

"My what?"

"You know. In the movies, the hero always has a tech guy behind the scenes, running the whole mission from his computer chair. Can I be yours?"

"Uh, sure. Yeah. But—stealthily, right?"

"Oh, for sure."

Peter once again turns for the suit.

"Peter."

He turns back. Ned is looking at him so seriously that for a second Peter holds his breath, thinking Ned is about to raise another concern about Peter's secret double life, like he did last night.

"Do you lay eggs?"

Peter has never felt more grateful for Ned Leeds in his entire life.

It takes some doing, but Peter eventually disentangles himself from Ned's web of unending questions long enough to don the suit and sneak back out the window. He doesn't head for the library right away, but rather back toward the alley near Mr. Delmar's, where he left his backpack the night before. He is relieved to see it is still there; less relieved when he opens it and finds that someone has removed the small pile of cash from the bottom. He swallows a bitter surge of panic at the thought of another forty bucks gone—he has to save face for Ned now, not just for himself—and pulls his street clothes on in place of the suit. At least he still has his Iron Man shirt.

He passes the bodega on his way out of the alley. There is caution tape strung all the way around it, and around the bank across the street, and half a dozen construction workers linger around the gash through the front entrance which, in the daylight, looks like the dark mouth of a sleeping monster. Their uniforms all have Stark Industries logos. Mr. Delmar is there, too, speaking to one of the members of the cleanup crew.

His back is turned; he doesn't see Peter. And Peter, ducking his head, pretends not to see him either.

“Wha-*bam*.” Ned drops a grocery bag on the table in front of Peter, making him jump. “My mom might have her flaws, but never say she let me go hungry.”

Peter perks up at the scent of salt and chicken. The good sleep he got last night carried him as far as the library—and faster than Ned, leaving him with the task of finding a table that is sufficiently hidden from view but still has access to a power cord, at which he is now sitting—but sleep could only do so much to keep hunger at bay. By the time Ned drops the grocery bag in front of him, Peter is starting to feel sick from it; he didn't have time to go grab anything from the warehouse before coming here. He tries to hide his relief and enthusiasm as Ned pulls out two massive tupperware containers of rice and meat, but there is no need: Ned shoves both of them toward him.

“She's on a whole cultural appreciation kick,” he says, throwing chopsticks at Peter, who catches them. “She's only making food from ‘the homeland,’ and don't get me wrong, I'm all about that rice life, but if I have to eat any more adobo I'm going to start bleeding soy sauce.” He pulls a candy bar out of his bag, holds it up. “I'm good, man, that's all yours.”

He busies himself setting up his laptop while Peter digs in. It's only when he's finished the first container and is contemplating the second—wanting to eat it, but battling the ghoulish instinct that tells him to save it—that Peter realizes Ned might have used soy-sauce blood as an excuse to give his portion away; a suspicion that is solidified when Ned tosses half the candy bar at Peter.

Peter's gratitude for his friend quadruples, overwhelming even the ghoul. He eats the second container, and the candy bar, and only when he is so full he feels like he might burst does he glance over his shoulder to ensure they are alone, then reach into his bag and pull out the suit.

Ned groans when Peter places it in his hands.

“It’s like touching the Mona Lisa,” he says. “I feel like I should be arrested right now.”

“Do you think you can hack into it?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” says Ned. He has already found the suit’s main USB connection, and he plugs it into his computer, cracking his knuckles as he does. “Sit back, my man, and let the guy in the chair do his work.”

For the next half hour Ned is quiet, in a way he only ever is when he is at work on a project like this one. It’s not a relief: the library is almost silent, and it’s a silence his brain seems determined to fill. Memories of the night before come screaming to the forefront—the loss of his job, yes (*what are you going to do now, Peter?*), but mostly of his unexpected meeting with Mr. Stark on the roof of his old apartment building.

What did Mr. Stark mean when he said he’d “look into it?” And what would he find when he did?

A snort of laughter jolts Peter out of his reverie: he looks at Ned.

“What?”

“Nothing,” says Ned. “Well—look. There’s a lot of subsystems in here, but they’re all turned off by something called ‘The Training Wheels Protocol.’”

“*What?*” Peter clambers to his feet, rounds the table to stand over Ned’s shoulder. Sure enough, the words ‘Training Wheels’ are splashed amidst the code in red letters. “Turn it off!”

“I’m... not sure that’s such a good idea, Peter,” says Ned, though he’s still laughing. “Dude, are you sure he doesn’t know how old you are?”

A reply rises automatically—*of course he doesn’t know*—but it gets stuck in Peter’s throat.

Is he sure? Peter has been careful. He’s covered his tracks, as far as he can tell, but... but this *is* Tony Stark they’re talking about. The smartest man in the world, and the richest. Maybe even the most powerful. If he wanted to know who Peter was, how old he was, he could figure it out in a second, and what proof does Peter have that he hasn’t? The fact that he said he wouldn’t?

A sharp, painful feeling has arisen in Peter’s chest. It feels like the beginnings of an asthma attack—no. It feels like it did last night, just before he blacked out in the alley.

If Mr. Stark knows, why pretend he doesn’t? To mess with Peter? To make him feel safe under false pretenses just so he can spring the truth on him when his guard is down, the way Skip did? And if he *does* know, then—then he really *doesn’t* care. Doesn’t care what’s happened to Peter, where he’s been, where he’s living, because none of that matters as long as Peter does what he’s good for and keeps his mouth shut—

(*Shut up. Don’t pretend you don’t want this*)

— and maybe Peter has been a fool this whole time, thinking he can get their attention by doing enough good. Maybe they’ve already gotten everything they wanted and now—

“Peter?”

Peter jumps. Ned has put a gentle hand on his arm, which Peter has unconsciously clenched into a painful fist at his side. He unclenches immediately, but it takes a second of staring into Ned’s concerned face before he remembers himself, remembers where he is, and what they’re doing

there.

“Turn it off,” he says again, more firmly this time. “He’s just treating me like a kid, dude. It’s fine, just... turn it off.”

“Peter... you are a kid.”

Peter flexes his hand at his side. It is still shaking.

“No,” he says, “I’m really not.”

Ned might be a little ridiculous when it comes to the superhero stuff, but he more than lives up to the hype when it comes to the computer stuff. By late afternoon he has turned off the Training Wheels Protocol and found the tracker, which Peter has carefully removed. They leave the library and walk to the wide lawn of Columbia’s quad at Peter’s behest, where Peter uses a piece of gum to stick it to a lamp pole.

“Okay Mr. Stark,” says Peter. “Have fun tracking this lamp.”

He and Ned leave, Peter feeling a little guilty but mostly elated, and just a tiny bit defiant. If Mr. Stark really doesn’t care who he is, then why does it matter *where* he is?

Emergency-activate *that*.

Ned pays for them both to take the train back to Queens where, true to his word, Peter spends what remains of the afternoon with him. Neither one of them has much money so mostly they just roam, visiting old haunts, wandering in and out of comic book stores and coffee shops and bodegas without ever buying anything, and while they wander they talk. Ned tells Peter about school—apparently Peter’s disappearance was hot gossip for a while but by the time the new year rolled around it had died down some. Everyone thinks Peter was ‘troubled,’ just like the counselor. Nobody was really surprised he ran away. Liz seemed sad though, Ned adds, as though to apologize for everyone else.

Peter tries to conjure up some feeling for Liz being sad that he disappeared. Ten months ago he would have been thrilled at the notion that someone like Liz even thought about him, let alone *missed* him. Today, however, Peter feels nothing. It doesn’t matter what Liz thinks. It doesn’t matter what anyone thinks, except Ned. If Ned doesn’t hate him, that’s enough.

When Ned is done with his side of the last five months, Peter fills in his own. He goes into more detail about his activities as Spider-Man—and, okay, maybe he embellishes a little, plays up the knife fights and plays down the giving directions to old ladies and stuff, but, well, it’s *nice*. Nice to have someone look at him, without his mask, and still think he’s a hero.

It’s also weird. Peter doesn’t really realize it until he starts talking about all the things he’s done with his mask on, but in all the time he’s been on his own he’s spent more time in the mask than he has out of it. In fact, this is the first afternoon he can remember he hasn’t spent patrolling. He’s been so afraid of what he will feel like if he’s *just Peter* all over again, the thought of just... not putting on the suit, not going out... it’s never crossed his mind.

But after what happened last night, it is, weirdly, almost a relief.

But the relief is short-lived. By that evening Peter has almost finished his Spider-Man stories and Ned has led him, almost unconsciously, to the cheap Thai place Peter himself sometimes visits, where they grab a table and Ned orders two cartons of noodles before Peter can even think to stop him, though Ned seems to catch the look of panic on Peter's face as the waiter takes the order to the kitchen.

"It's on me," he says. "What did I say about my mom not letting me go hungry? She never lets me leave the house without enough cash to survive a small apocalypse, it's fine."

For the first time since they left the library, though, Ned gives Peter a doubtful glance, and Peter has to work to swallow the disquiet that arose at the thought of paying the bill. Any bill.

Ned clears his throat and, thankfully, changes the subject.

"Anyway, it sounds like you're doing awesome stuff dude. I mean, not that I was really worried about all that stuff on the news—I mean, hello, we all have video evidence like, *right there*—but it's nice to know—"

Peter chokes halfway through a sip of water, comes up sputtering.

"What?" he says. "What do you mean—what news stuff?"

"Uh..." Ned is half laughing, half incredulous. "You're not serious, right? You do know all the stuff the news has been saying about you, don't you?"

Before Peter can reply, he pulls his cell phone out of his back pocket and spends a moment pulling something up, then holds it out to Peter. Peter snatches it and then stares, brow furrowed, at the screen for what feels like a full minute, trying to comprehend the headline in front of him:

SPIDER-MENACE STRIKES AGAIN!

***Eyewitnesses report seeing the masked so-called vigilante assisting in an armed bank robbery.
When will the city take a stand?***

"I wasn't—that wasn't—I was trying to help!"

To his shock, when he looks up, Ned is still battling a hint of laughter.

"That's not funny, man! Half the city is gonna think I'm some sort of criminal!"

Now Ned grits his teeth, grinning guiltily. "To be honest, dude, I think half the city already does. I mean, not really," he hastens to add, when Peter's eyes go wide. "Nobody really takes it seriously, otherwise they'd come after you and stuff, and it's only like, *The Bugle* and *The Sun* that publishes that junk, everyone knows they're garbage. But... you really didn't know? You have a rep, Peter."

"I—how? All I do is stop muggers and change tires, how can they think I'm a *villain*?"

"I mean... I guess a lot of people have said you let criminals go? So, like, *The Bugle* started saying you might be working with some of them and stuff? It's BS man, I told you, most people know you're just helping. But..."

Peter groans and leans back in his seat, hands over his eyes. He *does* let a lot of people go, just like he did for Mickey. But only the ones who haven't hurt anyone, and who aren't armed. He always webs up the dangerous ones for the police, always. He just... doesn't like ruining people's lives for no good reason. And now people think *he's* the bad guy?

“This is a nightmare.”

“Hey.” Ned reaches across the table, taps on it until Peter looks at him. “It’s fine, man. *I* never believed any of that stuff, and neither do the people who are actually paying attention. And besides, you’re Spider-Man, Peter. Who cares what people think?”

Peter lowers his hand, chewing his lip. Ned is right; Spider-Man was never about making people love him. It really wasn’t even supposed to be about making people notice him, at least not until Mr. Stark came along. It was just about... not feeling so hopeless all the time. Feeling like he could actually make a difference. And he can still do that regardless of what *The Daily Bugle* says.

It’s Mr. Stark that has him worried. Is that why he hasn’t asked for Peter’s help? Is that why he interrogated him on the rooftop, like he didn’t think Peter could handle himself? Because he doesn’t think Peter is trustworthy?

Or is it the other reason?

Is it because he knows?

“You know I would never... you know I’m only trying to help, right?” Peter says.

“Peter. Of course. I was a fan way before I knew it was you I was a fan of. And lots of other people are too.” Ned’s face splits into the widest grin Peter has seen all day. “Oh my God, I can’t believe I didn’t tell you sooner. You will never guess who your biggest fan is. It’s *Flash*, dude.”

Incredulity washes away worry. Together, Ned and Peter laugh away what remains of the day.

If there’s one lesson Peter has learned from living on the streets, however, it’s that lightness can only last so long—both literally and figuratively. As the sun begins to descend on the horizon, Ned is forced to make his way home, though before he leaves he does Peter one final favor: he buys him a phone card. Fifty dollars, which, Peter knows, is way more than his mom would have given him for a day’s allowance. Ned has dipped into his own cash for this.

“Text me,” he says, pressing the card into Peter’s hand outside the entrance to the subway station. “I can’t be your guy in the chair unless you have a way to talk to me, so use it.”

For once, Peter doesn’t object. Just closes his hand around the card and says softly, “Thanks Ned.”

“I have a meet tomorrow,” Ned says, “otherwise I would make you hang out with me again. But—soon, right?”

“Yeah,” Peter agrees. “Soon.”

“Okay.” Ned pulls him into a quick, one armed hug. “Best day ever, right?”

“Best day ever,” says Peter, and he watches as Ned descends the stairs, until he disappears beneath the city.

The slice of loneliness in Peter’s chest and throat when he is gone is surprisingly sharp. He suddenly feels like he has spent the entire day on an alien planet. A different world, a better one. But now it is time to return to his own.

He should go back to the warehouse. This day has been fun—the best day Peter has had since Germany—but it hasn't stopped the press of responsibility rising at his back, which has been growing more forceful all day. He needs to count his money, check his food, start coming up with a plan for... for the rest of his life, he guesses. But he's not quite ready to totally abandon the feeling of companionability he had with Ned. Of normality.

For once, he's not ready to put the mask back *on*.

So he goes to the school instead. He restocks on web fluid, he takes a much-needed shower. He shoots hoops in the gym, and fiddles with the piano in the music room. And all the while he avoids listening to the ghoul, who had faded during the day but is back now, crouched on his shoulder and hissing lowly in his ear.

(I'll look into it.)

(Stay close to the ground.)

(You haven't been doing this very long.)

(When will the city do something about you? When are they finally going to recognize you for the bug you are and crush you like you deserve to be crushed? Maybe they already have. Maybe it's already coming. Maybe—)

"Shut up."

(Shut up, Peter, shut up. You know you want this. You've always been such a good—)

"Shut up!"

Unthinkingly, Peter brings his fist down on the piano. He feels the keys splinter under his hand.

"Shoot," he whispers, clenching his hand at his side again, clenching his eyes shut. "Shoot. Come on. Come on, Parker. Get it together. You can do this. You can think of something. You just have to focus."

He can. He can do this. He has Ned now; he can figure out the rest. He can find another job if he has to, and figure out the food, and he can do it all while keeping the other things secret, the important things, because he's done it before. As for Mr. Stark...

He doesn't know. He can't. And even if he does—even if he thinks Peter is just some dumb kid, a know-nothing who trusts too easily and lets too many people go—well, Peter can take care of that too.

When his hands are steady again, Peter pulls his phone out of his pocket, loads the card, and opens his texts.

Hey Happy, he writes, it's Spider-Man. Tell Mr. Stark I'm sorry I freaked out on him. I'm fine, and he doesn't have to worry about what happened. I've got everything under control. U can still call me if you need anything. I'm around. :)

He sends it, shuts the phone, and expels a short, sharp breath through his nose.

He can take care of himself.

He always has.

And if he has to prove it to Mr. Stark—he will.

Peter heads home.

Contradiction

The next day, for the first time since leaving Skip's, Peter doesn't go out as Spider-Man.

This is because of what he discovered when he came home to check his cash the night before. It wasn't *really* necessary—he knows the amount by heart—but he'd still swept his hand into the corners of the filing drawer just in case before counting it.

Thirteen hundred dollars. It's way less than he'd planned to have by now, because in addition to his usual eight dollars a day, Peter's been spending a few bucks at the laundromat once a week, since he's noticed he draws way less attention on the street when his clothes are clean. And then there's the sandwiches he's bought here and there, the gummy worms.

And, of course, the phone cards.

He cursed himself for it all night—these little expenses he thought he could get away with because they *were* little. How they've piled up. How he reassured himself it was fine they piled up, because he had money coming in. How quickly that changed.

If he keeps going the way he's going, he'll be out of money before winter hits.

And that's absolutely not an option.

It's the last thing he wants to do, especially after his day spent with Ned—a day that almost, almost made him feel normal again. He wants to put on his mask, talk to Karen, fight some crime—do the things that make him feel like the superhero Ned admires, that give him a shot at impressing Mr. Stark, that make him feel like all of this is worthwhile—but instead, Peter wakes with the sun, tucks his suit into his backpack, tucks the burner phone in his back pocket, and goes out in search of a job.

By afternoon, Peter is pretty sure the universe is being intentionally cruel with its little ironies: if yesterday was the best day he's had since Germany, today is by far the worst.

Besides yesterday—when Peter had Ned as a shield—he hadn't really realized how little he's interacted with people outside of the suit since running away. Peter had almost forgotten how bad it was those first few weeks, when he still went out frequently in his street clothes. The pitying looks have not ceased in the intervening time: today, no fewer than five women give him long, searching stares while he wanders around the neighborhoods closest to his warehouse, looking for signs that any of the little shops or restaurants are hiring. Two of these women stop him to ask if he's alright, and why he isn't in school. Peter's mumbled excuses don't do anything to assuage the worry in their expressions; he only escapes further questioning by quite literally running away from both of them.

Worse than the pity, though, is the disgust.

The women are one thing. They see his age—bad enough—but everyone else, it seems, only sees his homelessness. It's past the point where he can conceal it with clean clothes and a shower: he's been wearing the same outfit too long; even the expensive, sturdy jeans Mr. Stark bought him are

stained, his Iron Man t-shirt a little worn. And then there's his hair. It's over-long, growing in uneven waves that tangle throughout the day no matter how often Peter washes it. He tried to cut it once, a few months back, but his clumsy attempt only made things worse: Peter's just let it grow ever since.

It's not doing him any favors now. People glower at him on the street, dodge to avoid walking too close to him, or—worst of all—just fastidiously avoid looking at him. Or, no. The worst is how every shop he enters to ask for an application turns him away, usually before he can even get the words out. Only one among the shopkeepers is even remotely kind: she's working the counter of a pawn shop in lower Queens, wearing a bright green tank top and a bright red wig, and she actually looks sad as she shakes her head at him.

“Honeybear,” she says, “even if you were anything close to eighteen, I wouldn't let you work in this shithole. I might be okay with getting held up every other night, but I wouldn't be okay with letting that happen to some kid.”

Before he leaves, she gives him a homemade tamale wrapped in tinfoil and pats him on the hand. Peter is disappointed, but he forces a smile, making a mental note to swing back as Spider-Man sometime. See if there isn't something he can do about those holdups.

When he exits the pawn shop and sits down on the curb to eat the tamale, however, he can't do it.

It's not that he isn't hungry—he hasn't eaten since the Thai food last night, his stash being too precious, now, to break into. It's that he actually *can't*. He looks down at the tamale and his stomach shrivels.

(Save it!) the ghoul shrieks. (Save it, you idiot, because the weather is getting colder and your stash is getting smaller and how the fuck are you going to survive without any money or food?)

It's irrational. Peter *knows* it's irrational, even more so than usual. This tamale won't be good by tomorrow, let alone by winter.

But he can't force himself to put it in his mouth.

He wraps it up. He puts it in his backpack. He heads back out.

Peter means to go out on patrol that evening, but by the time the sun has sunk midway down the horizon, he knows he won't be able to. He's shaking all over, and he doesn't know if it's because of the hunger or the disappointment. He didn't even get an *application*, let alone a job.

What is he supposed to do now?

So instead of going out, Peter goes home. He checks his stash, counts his cash again—even though it hasn't grown or shrunk since this morning—and curls up underneath the desk with his mask, thinking at the very least he can talk to Karen, try to drown out the ghoul. She won't stare at him, or worse, act like he doesn't exist. Of course she won't, because as she has pointed out, she isn't a person.

Before he can pull the mask on, however, the phone buzzes in his back pocket.

Peter nearly whacks his head on the top of the desk in his haste to extract it.

It's a message from Ned. Warmth pools in Peter's stomach; in the wake of how terrible today was, he was starting to wonder whether he hallucinated the previous one.

Ned: *How's crime fighting? Couldn't concentrate on school at all today, kept thinking about how awesome it is that you're you-know-who. Meet tomorrow after school?*

Peter has to close his eyes for a moment to gather himself. It's maybe not a very stealthy message, but he can't find it in himself to reprimand Ned for his lack of subtlety.

Peter: *New York definitely fears me. Tomorrow sounds good. Thai place again?*

Ned: *Love it. It's on me, by which I mean on my mom. Stay awesome, dude.*

The tightness in Peter's stomach eases just a little for the first time since he left the pawn shop. He flips the phone shut and reaches for his backpack.

He eats the tamale. It doesn't make him feel better at first—once it's done it feels as hard as a rock in his stomach—but after a few minutes he feels less shaky.

He puts the mask on.

"Hey Peter," says Karen, chipper as ever. "Are we going out tonight?"

"Um, I thought I'd actually... take the night off. Is that okay?"

"I think that's fine," says Karen. "We could just talk, if you want to."

Peter relaxes even further. He has no idea why, but for some reason he thought Karen might scold him—either for not going on patrol tonight, or for what happened the last time he did.

But Karen never scolds. She just listens.

"Could we?" he says.

"Sure thing. Do you want to talk about your day?"

Peter clenches again. He most certainly does not want that.

"Can you just—"

His voice catches when he realizes what he's about to say. *Can you just tell me what to do, because I'm running out of ideas and it scares me? Can you just tell me it's going to be okay, even if it isn't?*

It sounds so pathetic even just in his head that Peter cuts himself off with a shaky laugh.

"Sorry," he says. "Um, can you maybe just... talk for a little while? Until I fall asleep?"

He winces; that's almost as bad. But Karen, as usual, doesn't judge.

"Of course," she says, and maybe Peter's imagining it, but her voice sounds particularly gentle, now. "Any book that's in the public domain is available on my hard drive. I could read to you?"

"That... sounds good."

It does sound good, even though the notion of being read to at bedtime makes Peter feel like a little kid. There's no one around to judge him, he reminds himself.

There's no one around at all.

He falls asleep to the sound of Karen's voice, softly reading in his ear.

The promise of seeing Ned again fortifies Peter for the next day. He wakes not exactly refreshed, but with a new sense of vigor: It was just one bad day, he tells himself. New York is a huge city; he barely covered a fraction of a percent of what's out there yesterday. In fact, the more he thinks about it—as he pulls on the same clothes from yesterday, plus his hoodie, this time, to cover his hair—the more upset he is with himself for getting so down. Where's the hero Ned admires so much? Where's the hero who's going to prove himself to Mr. Stark? Where's Spider-Man?

He's right here, Peter reminds himself, stuffing his suit into his bag. He's got this. He even forces himself to grab a bag of Chips Ahoy and a protein bar before he leaves, eats the protein bar on his way out, despite the shriek in the back of his head telling him not to. Eating is like a charm, he tells himself, like an incantation. He's putting out positive vibes, proving to the universe that he believes he can take care of himself.

Isn't that how good vibes work?

Apparently, that is not how good vibes work.

This morning's search proves no more fruitful than the last. In fact it might even be worse: the hoodie, far from assuaging people's suspicions, seems only to deepen them. Peter gets yelled out of two convenience stores before he finally pulls it down, deciding the disgust is better than outright hatred.

It's a good thing he's meeting Ned, because by the time three o'clock rolls around, Peter isn't sure he would be able to hold it together otherwise. He's so accustomed to being turned away at that point that he hesitates at the hostess' stand when he arrives at the Thai place, forgetting that they know him there.

But they do know him, and the hostess—a pretty Asian girl who must only be a few years older than Peter—smiles at him when he walks in.

He thinks briefly that he could ask her for an application, but he dismisses the idea quickly. He can't afford to have her look too closely: If she says no, he doesn't just lose an opportunity; he might also lose one of the few cheap places he has left to eat.

"Your friend is here already," says the hostess.

She gestures to the booth in the corner, where Ned is already seated, waving in a very not-subtle manner.

Peter ducks his head and makes his way over to him. Ned has apparently beaten him by a significant margin: there are already two mountains of drunken noodles on the table.

“I couldn’t wait,” says Ned, whose own mountain is half-excavated, “I skipped lunch today, I was too excited to see you. So then of course by eighth period my blood sugar was like—” He makes a thumbs-down gesture. “Go ahead, catch up. Then we can, um, talk.”

Peter is distracted enough by the food—and the ghoul, screaming at him not to touch it—that he almost doesn’t catch the edge in Ned’s voice.

He looks up, fork in hand, heart hammering.

“Talk like fun talk?” he says. “Because that sounded like a ‘we need to talk’ sort of talk. But we don’t need to talk, do we Ned? Because you promised—”

Is it a good thing or a bad thing that Ned has absolutely no poker face?

Either way, the truth comes rushing out of him immediately.

“*Okay I’m really really sorry I didn’t mean to,*” says Ned. “It wasn’t on purpose, it was just that it was gym and Liz was there and so were a bunch of these girls and they were all talking, you know, doing that stupid game where you have to pick who you would marry and who you would kill and who you would—and they were doing superheroes, and they mentioned Spider-Man and—and it just slipped out!”

“*Ned,*” Peter says, aghast, “please tell me you aren’t saying what I think you’re saying.”

Every muscle in his body is contracted, the back of his neck flaring like it’s suddenly caught fire. *(This is why you don’t trust anyone, you idiot, because nobody can help you except yourself, and now look what’s happened. You’re going to have to run, you’re going to—)*

Ned, perhaps catching the look of horror on Peter’s face, shakes his head frantically, his eyes going wide.

“No!” he says. “No, no, god, no, I didn’t tell them it was you!”

For a moment Peter’s hearing fuzzes out. It’s like he’s underwater, staring at Ned from across a great distance. The storm-surge of terror and the sudden wash of relief combine to form a powerful nausea, which he barely manages to fight back, and probably only because there’s nothing in his stomach to throw up.

When he looks down, he sees he is squeezing his fork hard enough to bend it. He slowly unfurls his fist.

When Peter looks up, Ned is waving a hand in his face.

“Hello?” he says. “Hello? Please answer me. Please tell me I didn’t kill your brain on your third day of being alive.”

“I’ve always been alive,” Peter rasps.

In the booth across from him, Ned deflates with relief.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to freak you out. I didn’t tell anyone who you are, I promise. I wouldn’t do that, I swear.”

“You scared the crap out of me, man.”

“It was badly worded. Badly presented. Badly—everything. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Peter flexes his hand a few times. There is a red welt where the metal dug into his skin. “What—what are you talking about, if you didn’t tell anyone?”

The guilt returns full-force to Ned’s expression.

“I didn’t... tell anyone who you are,” he says slowly. “But I may have... slightly... mentioned that I... know Spider-Man?”

Peter groans, burying his face in his hands.

“You’re *killing* me, Ned.”

“I know.” Ned’s voice is oozing guilt. “I know, I messed up. It was just... it was gym, man, and you know how much I hate gym already, and we were doing that dumb Captain America fitness test and nobody wanted to be my partner because no one *ever* wants to be my partner, and then Flash started talking crap and I—”

Peter looks up abruptly, lowering his hands and frowning.

“What?” he says. “What do you mean no one wants to be your partner?”

Ned might have been Peter’s only friend at school, but that was because as far as his classmates were concerned, Peter was a knife-wielding ex-juvenile delinquent. Ned, on the other hand, always had a handful of companions from his plethora of extracurriculars. Since leaving Peter has assumed that has remained constant. It’s impossible not to want to be Ned’s friend.

But if the miserable, still-slightly-guilty expression on Ned’s face is any indication, this might not be strictly true.

“Sorry,” he says again. “I didn’t really want to tell you, because it’s totally not your fault *at all*, but... things have just been... kind of weird since you left.”

“People are mean to you because of me?” says Peter. He sets the fork down, appetite fully erased—this time by massive, clawing guilt. “What are they saying?”

“Nothing,” says Ned. “They’re not really *mean*, they just...” He heaves a sigh. “Look, after you left, I kind of... took the brunt of it. Everyone was asking if I knew where you went, why you left... and I mean *everyone*. Principal Morita pulled me into his office and made me talk to the CPS people, I even had to talk to the cops... and everyone else wanted to know too. Like, the other kids, I mean. And it didn’t really matter how many times I said I didn’t know, they all just acted like I was keeping some big secret or like I was maybe helping you hide, and all of a sudden I wasn’t Ned Leeds anymore. I was just the guy who used to be friends with Peter Parker. And if I was friends with someone like that—not that you are *like that*, it’s just—”

“It’s just what people think,” says Peter. “Ned, I’m so sorry. I didn’t even think—when I left, I didn’t—”

He’s heard the phrase *crushing guilt*, but this is the first time he’s actually felt it. This is so much worse than he’s felt getting kicked out of shops the past two days. His chest is tight from it.

How could he have thought he was the only one who would be affected when he ran away? After

all Ned had already done for him?

Ned, on the other hand, shakes his head.

“It’s not your fault,” he says again. “I totally get it, you had important stuff to do. And for the record, man, I’m always gonna stick up for you. Part of the reason no one likes me is because I never let them talk crap about you.” He worries his bottom between his teeth, lowers his eyes. “I think yesterday I just... Flash just got to me, you know? And I finally had something good, something that he really wanted and it... just slipped out. I’m really, really sorry.”

“Ned, *I’m* the one who’s sorry.”

Ned looks up, expression going hopeful.

“You’re not mad at me?”

Peter shakes his head.

“Dude, I had no idea you went through that. I wish... I’m just... I’m really sorry.”

Peter’s heart seems to be in his throat, and it is aching with how badly he wants to make this up to Ned, who has been a better friend than Peter has ever deserved. But he doesn’t know how. He has nothing—literally *nothing*—that he can give him, and even if he did, it wouldn’t come close to being enough.

But maybe the universe does listen, just a little bit. Because the next thing Peter knows, Ned is giving him a way to make it up to him.

“So...,” says Ned, “you’re not mad at me? For saying I know Spider-Man?”

“No. No, man, tell whoever you want, okay? Just... don’t tell them it’s me, okay?”

“Really? Oh my god, I was so scared, I thought—I thought you were gonna disappear again or disown me or—I don’t even know.”

Relieved, Ned digs into his drunken noodles with gusto.

Peter still can’t quite bring himself to touch his.

“It’s fine anyway,” says Ned around a mouthful of chicken, “nobody believed me. Flash said I was making the whole thing up. And I guess to be fair to Flash, it’s not like I had any proof.”

“Do you want some?”

Ned looks up sharply, a noodle half in and half out of his mouth.

Peter is similarly surprised at himself. It’s a reckless and possibly stupid offer, and if he hadn’t had such a terrible couple of days he probably never would have made it.

But it doesn’t seem to matter, right now, if he’s in the suit or out of it. Mr. Stark thinks Spider-Man is reckless anyway. And everyone else thinks he’s a delinquent.

Why not meet their expectations for once?

Besides, doesn’t Ned deserve this?

“What do you—?”

“I could show up,” says Peter. “I could come to you. In the suit, I mean. Just... swing by. You know, say hi. Give some proof.”

“You would do that for me?”

Peter nods firmly. “Just give me a time and place.”

Ned’s whole face lights up, as bright as it was the night Peter revealed himself as Spider-Man.

“Now that you mention it,” he says, “there is this party...”

This is how, three days later, Peter finds himself on a bus to the suburbs, wearing his suit under his jeans and sweatshirt, heart pounding so hard he can practically feel the seat vibrating beneath him with each *ka-thud*.

What felt like an excellent way to repay Ned on Tuesday feels stupider and stupider with each passing bus stop.

It’s supposed to be simple: Liz from decathlon is having a house party. Ned has been invited to said party, “out of pity,” according to him. All Peter has to do is swing in wearing his suit, shake a few hands, pat Ned on the back—let everyone know they’re pals—and swing back out. Easy.

Except now that the prospect of facing his classmates for the first time in five months is looming ever closer—even if he is going to be wearing the mask—Peter really isn’t sure if he can go through with it.

He keeps thinking of Mr. Stark, who hasn’t contacted him since the fiasco on Skip’s rooftop. He’s thinking of the Training Wheels Protocol, and Ned asking, “*Are you sure he doesn’t know how old you are?*”

Maybe the suit doesn’t matter. Maybe Peter is as transparent as cling wrap, no matter how well he covers his face.

Unlike with Mr. Stark, however, Peter doesn’t have to *wonder* if his classmates don’t care about him. He already knows. And if they figure out who he is under the mask...

It’s for this reason that, after exiting the bus and walking the three blocks indicated in the directions Ned texted him, hearing the thumping bass, the chatter of teenage voices at the house down the lane, Peter totally balks. Instead of going in, he circles around to the street behind, climbs over the back fence, and ends up on the roof of the greenhouse, where he crouches, staring at the flashing lights and moving bodies beyond the wide bay windows and trying to catch his breath.

He’s so focused on the latter task that he practically falls off the roof when the burner phone starts to buzz in his pocket.

“Dude,” says Ned the second Peter answers it, “This is the worst. Liz said hi, but the only other person who’s even acknowledged me is scary Michelle, and she just called me a loser, which might have been kind of a compliment but it’s impossible to tell with her. Are you close?”

“I’m outside,” Peter admits, “but I’m starting to think this might not be such a great idea. Spider-Man isn’t a party trick, maybe—”

“*Please*,” says Ned. “Just come inside for, like, ten minutes. Anyway, you can’t be a totally serious crime fighter *all* the time. It’s a party. Parties are supposed to be fun.”

“You just said it was the worst.”

“That’s because you’re not here yet. Once you’re here, it’ll be the best. Come on, Peter. Just think of the look on Flash’s face when he sees you.”

Peter takes a deep breath, holds it for a second, then lets it out slowly through his nose.

“Okay,” he says, “give me five minutes.”

“Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you!”

Ned hangs up. Peter still feels queasy. He actually feels *worse*, because he really wasn’t expecting Michelle to be here, and if there’s anyone who’s going to see through the disguise, it’ll probably be her. She was the only one who acted even a little bit suspicious about Skip, and that included every adult in Peter’s life.

But he can’t let Ned down. Not again.

Peter stands up, shimmies out of his day clothes, retrieves his gloves and his mask from his pocket and is just about to put them both on when he hears the distant but unmistakable sound of an explosion.

Peter’s head whips around just in time to see a crackle of purple electricity and a plume of smoke rise on the horizon, coming from the defunct overpass on the edge of the neighborhood.

The chitauri weapons, Peter thinks.

He’s going to be late for the party.

But responsibility is not a choice.

Peter turns away from the house, and he pulls on his mask.

He leaps off the roof.

Something Peter has realized about desperation—first from Felipe at the halfway house, then from Skip, and now again since losing his job—is that it works in contrary ways. When someone tells you can’t eat unless you behave, your brain might *want* to behave, but your body is just as likely to grab a knife out of an unattended drawer—you just can’t help it. Just like, when he tries to eat nowadays, the thought of reducing his supply makes him so nauseated he usually can’t get through more than a few bites. On one level, Peter knows it’s irrational. On another, he can’t stop himself. Behaving rationally just seems like it will... make everything worse. He can’t convince his body otherwise.

Which is maybe why he hasn’t gone out as Spider-Man since he blew up Mr. Delmar’s.

Peter has wanted to. He made a promise, after Ned fixed his suit, that he was going to prove himself—really show Mr. Stark that he wasn't just some dumb kid, that he could take care of himself. But every time he's thought of actually *trying* to prove it, Peter has frozen. What if in trying to prove he knows how to handle himself, he messes up, like he did at the bank, or on Skip's rooftop—thereby proving the *opposite*?

So he hasn't gone out. He's just spent his days wandering, searching, thinking about Ned but mostly about his money, and about how the nights are starting to feel just a little bit chilly again. And in all this, he had totally forgotten what Mr. Stark said about upgrades syncing when the mask and the suit are worn at the same time.

He remembers when, after running what feels like a full mile across an actual *golf course* (and thank God he lives in the city, because Spider-Man would be *useless* in the 'burbs) to reach the underpass, Karen says, "Congratulations on completing the Training Wheels Protocol, Peter! Looks like you're coming up on some armed men. This might be a good opportunity to try some of your new web shooter combinations."

It is not, however, a good time.

Because when Peter, clinging to the side of a crumbling support beam, aims his web shooter at the two seedy-looking guys standing at the back of a van full of alien weapons, one of whom is pointing a gun at a third, slightly-less-seedy-looking guy, he doesn't shoot a web at him. He shoots a *ball of electricity*.

The guy with the gun goes down in a twitching heap. His friend shouts a string of curse words and lifts his own gun.

And things kind of devolve from there.

Peter manages not to get anyone shot—he will give himself credit for that. Without his web shooters, however, he only manages it by literally tackling Less-Seedy Guy out of the way when Gun Number Two fires it in his direction. It's such a close call Peter can actually feel the air ripple as the bullet passes within inches of his head.

"Holy crap!" he shouts, right into Less-Seedy Guy's face. "Are you okay, man?"

"Who the hell are you?" Less-Seedy Guy shouts back.

No time for a reply; Gun Number One has recovered from Peter's electric web. He and his friend are already leaping into their van, gunning the engine. They're going to get away.

Peter shoves himself to his feet.

"Uh—you should take this as a lesson, guy," he says as he runs off after them. "And stop being a criminal!"

His next round of webs bounce off the back of the van like rubber balls.

"This isn't working, Karen! I'm losing them!"

"Should I activate instant kill?"

"*What?* No! Just—normal webs! Normal webs!"

"Can do!"

The settings switch, and to Peter's enormous relief, the next thing that emerges from his shooters is a familiar sticky rope.

Then Peter's relief disappears, because suddenly he finds himself being dragged across the asphalt, slamming into mailboxes and playsets and parked cars as he clings desperately to the end of his web, which is stuck to the rear end of a van full of alien weapons.

And to think twenty minutes ago Peter was nervous about a party.

Hello, unpredictability. Nice to see you again.

Peter almost gets them. He's really, *really* close. So close, in fact, that just as Peter is about to latch on to the side of the van, he has a flash of himself handing the weapons over to Mr. Stark and feels a thrill of excitement like he has not felt in weeks.

And the next thing Peter knows, he's flying.

It turns out, going from intense forward momentum to intense upward momentum is—pretty disorienting. So disorienting, in fact, that Peter doesn't really figure out what's happening until he's too high up to do anything about it—only then does he look up and see a freaking *man in a metal wingsuit*, clinging to his arms with clawed feet.

The man looks down at Peter with eyes obscured by glowing green goggles. Just for a second, though.

Then he drops him.

There's really no time for coherent thought as he spins through the air, sky and ground and water alternating dizzily in his vision, and yet somehow Peter finds one.

This is it, he thinks.

It doesn't scare him as much as he would have expected.

In fact, he feels almost calm about it.

Even the ghoul is silent.

Karen, on the other hand, is not.

"You're reaching terminal velocity," she says, "should I deploy your parachute?"

And Peter snaps back to himself.

"Yes," he shouts. "*Yes, deploy, deploy, deploy!*"

Karen, as always, obliges.

Peter is walking back across the golf course, sore and battered and using every effort to keep his disappointment in himself at bay when his phone rings again. Peter, amazed that it didn't fall out of his boot when he was falling, answers it immediately.

"Hey." On the other end, Ned sounds like *he* is using every effort to not sound totally despondent. "I don't know what happened, but I, uh, I thought I should tell you I left. That party was lame anyway, so—"

"*Ned*," Peter gasps; in all the chaos, he'd completely forgotten about his friend. "Oh my god, I'm so, so sorry. Something happened, something—there was this guy, dude, this guy in a—and I just, I got distracted, but I'm on my way back now, I promise, please don't leave."

"Too late." Ned chuckles, but even through the phone Peter can tell it's a little watery. "My dad picked me up. It's okay."

"It's not," Peter says miserably. "Ned, I totally screwed this up. I was supposed to make things up to you and I just made them worse."

Ned is silent for a second.

"Ned?" says Peter, tentative. "Are you still there?"

"Um, yeah. My dad is kind of listening in. Can I call you tomorrow?"

Tears spring to Peter's eyes. He bites them back.

"Yeah, man. I'll talk to you then."

He wants to say something more—something better—but Ned has already hung up.

Guilt barrels down on him, monstrous. How is this possible? How is it that the second he gets something good in his life, he manages to fuck it up, no matter what?

Peter tilts his head back, trying to will the tears from spilling over.

His phone buzzes. Peter scrambles to answer, but it's not a phone call. It's a text. From an unknown number.

Unknown: *Rooftop. Now.*

Peter knows who sent it. He also knows exactly what it means.

What choice has he got?

Peter: *Omw*

He still has bus money—another undeserved gift from Ned—in his hoodie, which he left on the greenhouse roof. He's already heading that way, but now he picks up his pace, even though he's so miserable he would rather just curl up on the lawn and never move again.

In his haste, he almost misses the purple core, sitting in a lump of torn-up grass. He catches it only out of the corner of his eye.

Peter picks it up. And he goes to meet Mr. Stark.

“I understand we had a deal,” says the Iron Man suit the moment Peter crawls over the ledge and onto the rooftop of Skip’s building, “but these trust issues are messing with my self-esteem. What’s the deal, kid?”

Peter would normally be thrilled for a chance to talk to Mr. Stark directly, but tonight he’s so tired he would rather be literally anywhere else. He leans against the ledge, therefore, just to keep himself upright, and pulls the chitauri core out of his hoodie, which he’s wearing over his suit.

“I told you there were alien weapons out there,” he says. “You didn’t listen.”

The suit doesn’t even glance down.

“Nuh-uh, Sonny Crocket, no changing the subject. We aren’t here to talk shop. We’re here because one minute I’m asking you to keep your head down and the next I’m getting an alert from your suit that you’re rapidly approaching splatsville, followed by a last-second chute deploy. A chute which is supposed to be for *emergencies only*, by the way.”

“I—”

“So, naturally, thinking it’s an emergency, I send a suit to your most recent location. We talked about that, didn’t we? The *emergency-activated* tracker that I put in your suit? The one I put there to make sure you never *made it* to splatsville without backup? So imagine my surprise when that suit arrived on your campus to find—nothing. Just a bunch of gawking undergrads and a lamp, to which my *very expensive* emergency tracker was stuck. The lamp is fine by the way. How about you?”

Peter doesn’t want to talk about how he is. He doesn’t even want to *be* here, and judging from the irritation in Mr. Stark’s voice, neither does he.

“I’m *fine*,” he says. “That’s actually the whole point. I’m totally fine, I know how to handle myself, and I *don’t want you tracking me*, so—”

Peter cuts himself off abruptly, because something Mr. Stark has said had just fallen into place.

He said “your campus.” Not “the campus.” *Your*.

He bought it. He doesn’t think Peter is some dumb teen. He thinks he’s a college kid. Just like Peter wanted him to.

So why does Peter’s throat suddenly feel so tight? Why does this new knowledge make it so hard to take a breath?

Mr. Stark takes Peter’s sudden silence as a chance to interject.

“Look kid,” he says, “we need to talk.”

Dread floods Peter’s limbs. He almost drops the chitauri core. If he wasn’t leaning against the ledge he might have stumbled.

(*You’re nothing, Peter. You messed up too many times. And now he knows it.*)

“The whole lone wolf thing? It’s getting kind of old. And I hate to say it, but it’s getting you in trouble, too. I know there’s... appeal to being the one the little guys rely on, but it’s starting to turn heads, and not always the right ones, if you get my drift.”

Peter has to swallow the dryness in his throat a few times before he can reply.

“You told me to help the little guy. To stick close to the ground, remember?”

“Churros,” says Mr. Stark. “Little old ladies. Not alien weapons, not peeping on little girls, and not—not handing out favors to the wrong sort of people. I get that things aren’t always black and white, kid, but sometimes they’re kind of black and white, you know?”

Peter’s heartbeat, which has been rising to a roar in his ears throughout, suddenly dulls to a hush.

“You mean because of the stuff in *The Daily Bugle*?” he says. “Because I never—”

“Yeah, that’s not exactly a good look,” says Mr. Stark. “But that’s only part of it.”

“What’s the other part?”

Mr. Stark doesn’t reply for a second. Like he’s thinking his answer over.

“Look,” he says, finally, “how much do you know about the Parker kid?”

Now Peter’s heart goes silent.

He never told Mr. Stark his last name. Which means—

“You looked into him,” he rasps. “I—why would you do that? Why would you—I told you that was my business, man. I told you I was handling it, and you told me—you *promised*—!”

“I promised I wouldn’t try to find out who you are,” Mr. Stark says. “But I actually have a whole thing where I look out for my teammates, kid, especially when they’re dumb, bullheaded, and completely new at this. It’s one thing to want to save the whole world, Spidey, but it’s another to actually understand the people you’re saving. So yes, I looked into Peter Parker, because after our last conversation, I had a feeling you didn’t. And to be perfectly honest, I’m not sure he’s the kind of person you should be associating with, especially considering the reputation you’ve already built for yourself.”

There is a strange feeling building in Peter’s skull.

Mr. Stark looked into him. He might not have known it *was* him, but he *looked*, and now he knows—he knows—

He knows what’s in Peter’s file. He knows about Mrs. Arlington. He knows about the knife at the halfway house. He knows Peter ran away from a home that any foster kid would have been lucky to have; a home where he had friends, and school, and food. And that’s all Mr. Stark knows. He can’t know the other parts, because Peter never told anyone.

And Mr. Stark believed it all.

It feels like Peter is leaving his own body. And maybe he is, because when he next speaks, he barely recognizes his own voice.

“What do you want from me, man?” he says. “You tell me to keep my head down, but you don’t want me to actually help people. You tell me you want my help, but you never call me, and you

clearly don't trust me—the*Training Wheels Protocol*? What the hell, man? Oh, and how about the fact that Happy hates me, and you—”

“You hacked the Training Wheels Protocol?”

Peter only vaguely recognizes that Mr. Stark sounds impressed. He plows on.

“This might be news to you, dude, but I was doing this before I ever met you. I helped you with your stuff, and all I wanted was for you to just—let me do my thing. So just do that. Just let me do my thing and—and—”

“You wanna talk about confusing?” Mr. Stark interrupts. “Tell me what *you* want, Spider-Man. Because one minute you're all about the secret identity, and the next I have four hundred voicemails, begging for bigger, better baddies whose asses you can kick. So which is it? You wanna be a friendly neighborhood Spider-Man, or do you want more?”

“Both! I mean—I don't know!”

“Then *let me help you*. I've been doing this longer than you. Believe it or not, I have some idea what it takes to be out here like this. And if you weren't so goddamn stubborn, I might actually be able to help you work through some of the more confusing shit, the shit that's inevitable in this line of work. You need help, Spidey, so why aren't you letting me help you?”

“Everyone needs help,” Peter spits. “Everyone. Not just the ones you think are worth it. Yeah, I let some people go, but at least I don't ignore them. At least I don't just immediately—”

“Hold it right there kid, because—”

“*There are alien weapons!*” Peter bursts. “They're big and they're dangerous, and they're *out there* and nobody is paying attention! You're just—”

“I'm just what?” Mr. Stark's voice is cold now, quiet, but it shuts Peter up immediately. “What am I, Spider-Man? An idiot? Is that what I am?”

“I didn't say—”

“Because the last time I checked, I was the *only* one who was trying to see things for what they are. Who thought it was maybe not a great idea to just run blindly into every heroic-looking situation without a second of forethought. Does that make me an idiot, Spider-Man? Is that what you think?”

“No,” says Peter. “I just—”

“Are you gonna take off the mask?” says Mr. Stark bluntly.

Peter sucks in a breath.

“No,” he says.

“Fine,” says Mr. Stark. “Fine, do it your way. Contrary to what you might have heard, kid, I don't actually break my promises. You want to do everything on your own? Great. You're not the first superhero to feel that way. But don't say I didn't warn you. About all of it.” He points at the rooftop, down toward the apartment where, Peter knows, Skip and Lily and Emma are all asleep. Where his old bedroom stands empty. “Keep your eyes open, kid. The way you're headed, you're gonna need them.” The suit powers up. “And for the last time, leave the alien stuff alone. I told you I'm handling it.”

Peter doesn't have time to respond. It blasts off.

Mr. Stark is gone.

The Fall

Despite the fact that it takes him the better part of the night to fall asleep, Peter wakes early the next morning—a few minutes before the first hint of sunrise makes its way through the open window of the foreman's office.

Peter doesn't move right away. There is an achey, deadened feeling in his limbs, like they are slowly turning gangrenous. It's been there since last night.

"Peter? It's five thirty am. Are you sure you don't want to try to sleep some more?"

That's Karen. Peter fell asleep with the suit on. Her voice is soft, but Peter almost wishes it wasn't. Everything would make so much more sense if it was just one way or another—hard or soft, warm or cold. Good or bad.

But things aren't that way, and they don't make sense. He's hungry, but he can barely eat. He's tired, but the thought of falling asleep makes his stomach turn. He desperately wants someone to just be nice to him, but the thought of hearing another kind word come out of Karen's system makes him want to tear his own hair out.

Mr. Stark found out who Peter is. He found out who he *was*, anyway, and all he saw was what everyone else saw. It's all anyone has seen since Uncle Ben died.

He doesn't think Peter is worth it.

Maybe he's not.

"Peter?"

Peter rolls over, away from the window.

"Did I ever tell you how my uncle died?" he says.

"You've never mentioned it. Are you okay, Peter?"

"It was my fault," says Peter. "I was mad at him. I don't even know why I was mad at him anymore, I just was, and I wanted to leave, so I did. I just walked out of the house like it didn't mean anything. And when he came to get me, he got mugged. Some guy shot him. The police said it was because he wanted his wallet, but really it was because of me. Because I wasn't grateful. And I was angry."

"Peter," says Karen softly, "that doesn't sound like it was your fault to me."

"Maybe everyone is right, Karen."

Can AIs hesitate? Peter doesn't know why they would, but Karen seems to.

"What do you mean?"

"You heard what Mr. Stark said last night."

"He didn't have the whole story. If you told him what you've told me—"

"Maybe he didn't have all the facts," says Peter, "but maybe that doesn't matter. I *was* that kid the

night Ben died. I was angry and mean and I didn't think of anyone except myself, and that's why my uncle died. And everything else that's happened was because of that. That's what May thought. And that's what everyone else thinks, too. So maybe Mr. Stark is right. Maybe I'm not worth it."

"Peter." There is something new in Karen's voice, some faint edge that Peter has never heard there before. It sounds almost like fear. "All you have to do is tell me to disable the protocol that stops my outgoing transmissions. I could help you talk to Mr. Stark."

Peter laughs ruefully and sits up, crawls out from underneath the desk.

"He told me not to associate with Peter Parker, K. What do you think he'd do if he knew I *was* Peter Parker?"

"I could—"

"I haven't even done any of the things I said I was gonna do," he says. "I was supposed to help people—people like me, and all I've done is—waste money and try to get Mr. Stark's attention. I thought... I thought I could be better. I thought Spider-Man would make me better. But I just let everyone down. Ned... I just... I need..."

Peter bites his own tongue, because whatever is rising inside of him is massive, and he knows he won't be able to hold onto it if it starts pouring out. He won't be able to hold onto himself. There is a feeling in his stomach like the ground is crumbling out from under him. It feels like the moment after the winged guy let him go last night. Like he's just started a long, long fall.

"Please, Peter. Let me—"

Peter pulls the mask off. He puts his street clothes on over the suit, but keeps it on. He tucks the mask in his back pocket.

He might be falling, but he can't let go just yet.

Spider-Man was always supposed to be a chance to make things better. But Peter has been trying to make things better for the wrong person. He's been trying to help himself but (*when you stick up for yourself things always get worse*) he should have been looking out for the people he promised he'd look out for when he first got his powers.

He can't fix himself. He can't fix Peter Parker. But as Spider-Man he can be better. He has to.

(*I always told you you were nothing, Peter.*)

He knows where he's going, but Peter is still surprised to find himself there. He remembers almost nothing of the walk, has no idea how he knew the way when he was so far outside of himself he wasn't even thinking, and yet here he is. Standing in front of the halfway house.

It's surreal, seeing it from the outside, even after more than a year has passed. It feels like looking

at a picture of a thing instead of the thing itself: there's something two-dimensional about the flaking paint, the sagging chain-link fence. Like it's been painted there, rather than built out of stone and wood.

The windows are all dark, but it's still early. It's good; the providers are probably still asleep. They must still keep the kids on the upper floor. Peter can sneak around the back, climb in through the attic. Locked doors might keep the kids in, but they can't keep him out.

It's what he should have done ages ago. The moment he got his powers. The very fact that he *didn't* makes him understand, more and more, why Mr. Stark could have looked at that file and seen nothing but a troubled kid, not worth saving. He saw Peter Parker, and Peter Parker was the one who didn't want to come back here. Who thought about it, those first weeks and months, who even came close once or twice, but turned away each time, chest heaving, stomach cramping with phantom emptiness. Peter Parker had broken the promise he'd made—to use his powers to be the kind of superhero who saved kids like Arnold and Felipe.

But he isn't here as Peter now. He's here as Spider-Man.

Peter takes a deep breath, and grips the fence.

"Hey, asshole."

Peter whips around. There is a woman standing across the street from him, short and stout and middle-aged, carrying a heavy tote bag. He'd thought he was alone—it's barely past six—but from the scowl on her face, she sees exactly what Peter's about to do.

"You wanna go to jail for nothing, be my fucking guest," she says. "Vultures like you have already picked that place over though, fair warning."

"Sorry," says Peter, blushing furiously. "I wasn't—what do you mean?"

She jerks her head at the gate. Peter hadn't even looked at it; he wasn't planning on going through it. Now he sees there is a laminated sheet of paper tied to it with zip ties, and he edges closer to read it.

CLOSED

By Order of the State

NO TRESPASSING

When he looks back up at the house, he sees there is a heavy metal chain on the front door. And the windows aren't just dark—the ones on the lower level have been boarded up.

It's gone.

Peter turns again, shouts after the woman, who has already started to walk away.

"Wait!" he says. "Wait, do you know what happened?"

She looks disgruntled at the holdup, but she stops nonetheless.

"They were starving their kids. You must not be from around here, it was hot-shit news for about a minute last year. Big scandal, money going to all the wrong places, blah, blah, blah. If you ask me the real scandal was that anyone was fucking surprised. I live around the corner, I saw how those

boys looked. Anything for a buck, right?" She squints at him. "But what's it to you? Besides the fact you're a shitty thief, I mean."

Peter shakes his head vigorously.

"No, I wasn't trying to—I just knew someone who—how did they find out? About the—about the food?"

She shrugs. "Some kid ratted them out, I think."

"Do you know who it was?"

"What do I look like, the fucking phone book?"

She turns away, muttering to herself.

Peter waits until the woman rounds the corner. He takes one last look at the hollowed-out windows of the halfway house, and then he takes off.

Peter ends up sitting outside the Queens No. 3 library for nearly an hour before it opens, but when it does he's the first one inside. He scrambles to claim one of the ancient, blocky computers, then drums his fingers so hard on the tabletop he nearly dents it waiting for the thing to boot up.

The second it does, he Googles the halfway house.

The very first article that pops up gives him what he's looking for:

Investigation of Local Boys' Home Concludes

Former residents claimed abuse, starvation, neglect

It's not the headline that has Peter's heart beating out of his chest, however. It's the picture that goes along with it. The picture of a tall, handsome boy in a suit, standing on the steps of some unknown courthouse, next to a woman who looks thin and tired but formidable nonetheless: she is holding the boy's arm and staring into the camera with an expression that is simultaneously bereaved and defiantly proud.

The caption reads, "*Felipe Cerna, 15, who brought the charges against the boys' home, exits the courthouse with his mother after settlement was reached.*"

"He did it," Peter whispers.

He did it. Felipe did it. He did what Peter couldn't do—he got the place shut down. And he's not in jail. He's with his mom. Maybe even with his sister.

He didn't need a superhero. He did it all himself.

Peter starts to laugh. It begins small, just a chuckle, but soon it swells, until he has to bury his face in his hands to prevent the gales of laughter threatening to burst out of him.

He did it, he did it, he did it. And he didn't do it because he had superpowers, or because he wanted

to get some billionaire's attention. Felipe did it because it was the right thing. Felipe did it because he is a hero, all on his own.

When Peter finally gets a hold of his hysterics and pulls his hands away from his face, his palms are wet, and so is his face. He was crying without realizing it.

It doesn't matter. He's so proud he could cry in front of his entire class at school and he wouldn't care for a second. Not even if Flash was there.

"Thank you, Felipe," he says.

He prints the article.

(You gotta take care of yourself, Pedro.)

The article is still in his back pocket two hours later when, trembling, Peter heaves himself onto the ledge of Ned's bedroom window and taps on the glass.

It's Saturday again. Peter can't believe it's only been a week since he revealed himself to Ned and spent the night here. But he's glad. Because that means Ned is right where Peter hopes he will be: in his bed, snoring softly.

He sits up, though, when he hears Peter.

There's a moment of disorientation, then Ned spots him. His brow furrows, but he gets out of bed and opens the window, steps aside so Peter can crawl through.

"It's early, Peter."

It's ten am. Peter has been awake for almost five hours—which is more than he slept.

Rather than point out the time, Peter says, "Ned, I'm sorry. Please, please don't hate me. Please."

Ned looks skeptical, blinking and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, but when Peter pulls his mask off the skepticism falls away, replaced by concern.

"Woah," he says, "are you okay? You don't look so good, Peter."

Peter's face is still swollen from crying. He puts a hand to his cheek and—whoops. He's still crying. He hadn't even noticed.

"I'm fine," he says. "I'm okay. I'm just—Ned, I can't stop thinking about last night and I had to come tell you I was sorry. I messed up. I really messed up, I made you this promise and I didn't follow through and it made me realize that I've done that a lot, that thing where I say I'm gonna be better and then I'm just *not*, but I want to be. I really do, and I want to make it up to you, but I know you have to give me a second chance before I can do that, and I know it's *not* a second chance, it's like, my eighty-seventh chance, and I know I don't deserve it, I know that, but if you'll just hear me out—"

“Peter,” says Ned. “Slow down, dude. I’m not mad at you, okay? Just breathe.”

Peter cuts himself off, mouth hanging slightly open.

“You’re not mad at me?”

He sways. The room is spinning. Another whoops—he didn’t eat before he left the warehouse this morning. But Ned grabs his arm, guides him firmly but gently toward the bed. Peter sits.

“Wait here,” says Ned.

Ned disappears into the hall and Peter, whose heart is still beating frantically, takes the article out of his pocket and stares at it until he returns, carrying a glass of water and a cereal bar.

“You’re acting super weird,” says Ned, pressing both items into Peter’s hands. “You’re acting like my mom when she gets in one of her phases. You need to calm down.”

Peter knows this. Though Karen remained silent—at his request—throughout the trip over here, the heart rate monitor has been blaring red in the corner of his vision the entire time. He takes the water, drinks it all, chases it with the cereal bar and for the first time in forever barely thinks about it as he does.

Finally, his heart starts to slow. He takes a deep breath. The tears are slowing down now, too. He waits until they stop to speak.

“Sorry,” he says. “I shouldn’t have just burst in here like that.”

Beside him on the bed, Ned looks more serious, and more frightened, than Peter can ever remember seeing him.

“I’m sorry,” he says in a small voice. “I wouldn’t have hung up on you last night if I knew it was gonna freak you out this bad. My dad really was listening. I didn’t mean to make you think—”

Peter shakes his head. “It’s okay,” he says, “it’s okay. It was my fault. I should have shown up, Ned. I should’ve.”

“You... said something happened?”

So Peter tells him about the winged guy. Partly to explain, yes, but mostly because he can’t stand the expression on Ned’s face for another second. Pity and fear and worry. An expression that says he’s about fifteen seconds from seeing behind the front Peter has presented since he revealed himself last week.

It works, too. By the time Peter is finished, Ned’s fear has receded, replaced by an open-mouthed look of awe.

He groans. “I can’t believe I was worried about a stupid party when a badass bird-themed villain was kicking your ass six blocks away.”

Relief. Ned hasn’t disowned him. (*Not yet.*) He still has a chance to make things better. Like Felipe did.

“Hey,” he says weakly, “I got my licks in, too.”

“I thought you said he dropped you in a lake.”

“*Almost* dropped me in a lake. I parachuted onto the ground.”

“You used the chute? Oh my god, I can’t believe it. I ran for it like an idiot because Betty Brant said she liked my hat, and I could have been watching you parachute away from supervillain. My life is the lamest.”

Peter smiles, tentative. “It’s a cool hat, dude. And why were you hiding if she said she liked it?”

“Because I didn’t know if she meant it like, Cool hat, Ned, or *Cool hat*, Ned, you know? And don’t change the subject. This is awesome. Alien tech? In Queens? Did you tell Mr. Stark? What did he say?”

Peter’s smile disappears.

“I um... I actually thought I would try this one on my own,” he says.

“You don’t think he’ll help you? It seems like kind of a big deal. And I thought you were trying to impress him. You know, show him you aren’t a kid.”

“I’m not a kid,” says Peter firmly. “And it’s not about that anymore. These weapons are out there, dude, and nobody’s gonna stop them if I don’t.”

There must be some particular hardness in Peter’s voice, because Ned’s smile fades too.

“Are you sure you’re alright, Peter?”

Peter shakes his head. “I’m fine,” he says. “But... I could use your help, Ned. I have the core, but I don’t know where to go from here. I know I still owe you big time, but—”

“Uh, hold on. You want me to help you with finding the guy who is selling alien weapons to criminals and you think you need to do me a favor first? That *is* the favor. I’m one thousand percent in. Tell me what you need.”

Peter really wants to hug him. His head does, anyway. His body, however, balks at the idea. So instead he says, “You’re a really good friend, Ned.”

“So are you, Peter. You know that, right?”

Peter doesn’t know that. He really doesn’t think it’s true. But he’s going to be better. He will be.

“Thanks, Ned.”

“So what do we need to do?”

“I have an idea,” says Peter, “but I don’t know how to follow through. How much did you figure out about my suit?”

Since Peter woke Ned up so “early,” they have some time before his parents get suspicious. They sit together on his bed, therefore, while Ned walks Peter through his suit’s functions—one of which, it turns out, is that it records absolutely *everything*. A boon for both of them: Ned gets to watch Peter parachute away from a supervillain after all.

And Peter gets to go after him.

Because, as it turns out, Karen can also connect to the internet. This is one of the features that was turned off by the Training Wheels Protocol, which is only confusing for a second (*He didn't think I could handle browsing BuzzFeed?* Peter thinks), since they quickly discover it's not *just* the internet. Karen can also hack criminal databases—which she promptly does, as soon as Peter asks her to run facial recognition on the three guys from last night.

Only one comes back with a match: its Less-Seedy Guy, the one Peter jumped on to stop him from getting shot. His real name is Aaron Morales, and he's out on parole for a series of misdemeanors.

"Is there any way I can, I don't know, track him?" Peter asks. "Or is that creepy?"

"I can scan available security cameras," replies Karen, who has kept her tone carefully professional since this morning. "It might take a few days to get a match."

"Do it," says Peter. "And, um. Thanks Karen."

He's thinking of the real Karen, now—the one for whom his AI is named. She was just as kind as the fake one. He hopes she's okay now. He hopes they didn't ruin her life when they got her fired. Maybe what Felipe did fixed things. Maybe he saved her too.

AI-Karen's voice softens.

"That's what I'm here for, guys."

Peter pulls off the mask and looks at Ned, who has been following along on his computer, to which the suit's USB is attached.

"So what're you gonna do now?" he says. "Do you have any other leads?"

"I guess I just have to wait. Can you meet me again tomorrow?"

"Aw, shoot, I forgot to tell you, I'm going out of town tomorrow. I won't be back until Wednesday."

"For what?"

"Decathlon. It's the big one. Everyone's been freaking out about it all week. Liz even mentioned you, she said she wished you were still around. Flash was pissed. I think Michelle might have been too. She looked like she'd swallowed a worm, anyway."

Peter's stomach squirms. In a different life maybe he would have been going out of town tomorrow too. It's been so long since he's been out of the city he can't even picture it. He doesn't know if the squirming is because he's jealous or just resigned. He guesses it doesn't matter. Neither one feels great.

"What about next weekend?"

"Um... next weekend's Homecoming. I was kind of thinking I might try to go even though I'm a humongous loser cuz, you know, what's the point if you're not putting yourself out there? But I can totally cancel if anything comes up with the alien weapons. Like, for sure."

Peter can tell Ned is trying to cover his disappointment. He knows why: Peter enrolled too late to go to his freshman homecoming, but he heard the stories from his classmates and from Ned,

apparently it's a total blast.

This, more than the decathlon trip, should probably disappoint Peter, remind him of how much of an outsider he's become. But it has the opposite effect.

"Dude," he says, "that's perfect."

"Perfect—for what?"

"For making it up to you," says Peter, excited now that he has an opportunity to actually do something nice for Ned, to be a better friend, a better person. "I can come to homecoming."

"You know I'm a super modern dude and whatever, and I'm all for taking you as my date, don't get me wrong," says Ned, "but don't you think people will be a *little* suspicious if I show up with you on my arm?"

Peter punches him lightly on the shoulder.

"Not as your date," he says, while Ned, grinning, rubs his arm. "As Spider-Man."

Ned's face goes slack.

"You would do that for me?"

Peter nods.

"In front of the whole school?"

Peter nods again.

Ned pulls him into the biggest hug Peter has had in recent memory. He resists the urge to pull away, ignores the nerves that flutter in his stomach at the thought of what he just promised to do. Eventually, tentatively, he even hugs Ned back.

(Responsibility is not a choice.)

It turns out not to matter that Ned is going out of town: though Peter checks diligently throughout the next three days, there is no sign of Aaron Morales anywhere in the city. Karen thinks he is probably laying low in the wake of what happened in the suburbs, and Peter agrees, though it's disappointing. He could really use the distraction.

He's stopped looking for a job. As long as the whole world looks at him like he's a criminal, it's too big a risk; eventually someone is bound to call the cops on him, or worse—CPS. So Peter makes a new plan. He will eat through his stash of food. Very, very slowly. And very carefully. He will save all of his money—every last cent. And maybe by the time the food is gone, Mr. Delmar's will be fixed. He can see if he can get his job back then, and if not—

Peter doesn't want to think about if not.

So, without any leads on the alien weapons, he throws himself into learning how to use his suit. Karen is still being careful with him—he has the sense she realizes she freaked him out the other day by trying to get him to talk to Mr. Stark—but she remains as helpful as ever when it comes to his Spider-Man activities. She walks him through each new function, until, by Wednesday evening, Peter can select his web functions, and use the infrared setting, and even knows how to operate the gliders—because if nothing else, Mr. Stark lives up to his reputation for overkill. And when he's not doing that, he returns to what he's good at: fighting crime. Helping moms with their groceries.

Being Spider-Man.

(He visits the girls once, too, but not on his normal night—not at night at all. He doesn't want Mr. Stark to catch him, so he goes during the day, and he doesn't speak to either of them. Just peers through the window from the fire escape on the adjacent building and hopes they know how much he loves them, even if he can't tell them.)

Peter's exhausted. The two-items-per-day rule he has concerning the pile of food doesn't really do anything to keep up with his activities, and he still has to convince himself to eat every time, has to scream down the ghoul, who is growing louder every time the pile shrinks. But he can't stop, because if he stops there will be nothing *but* the ghoul.

He knows what he's doing now. He just has to keep doing it.

On Wednesday night, while he is lying under the desk in the foreman's office, preparing for sleep, he gets a text message. He's been good about it, this time: he hasn't called Happy or Mr. Stark once since last week. There's plenty of minutes left on his phone. Now, he reserves them for Ned.

Ned: *I know ur phone doesn't get pictures but imagine me holding a first place trophy and looking like a total badass*

Peter: *You guys won????*

Ned: *Don't tell me u ever doubted me.*

Peter: *Never. Congrats, dude.*

He sets the phone aside, grinning, almost as proud of Ned as he was of Felipe the other day.

A thought strikes, intrusive:

They didn't need me.

The ghoul responds:

(They never did.)

Peter closes his eyes, squeezes them until the ghoul stops cackling.

“You're okay,” he tells himself. “You've got this, Spider-Man.”

This time, no one replies.

He finds Aaron Morales on Thursday.

Aaron isn't a bad guy, it turns out. As soon as Peter gets Karen's alert he tracks him to the parking garage where he was spotted, rearing for a fight, but Aaron doesn't give him one. He doesn't even struggle when Peter webs his hand to the trunk of his car. He does mock Peter's voice—which, to be fair, Interrogation Mode might not totally suit him—but when Peter reverts to his normal one and asks about the weapons, Aaron just says,

"I can't tell you where the weapons are, but I can tell you where the guy selling them is gonna be."

Peter, who was readying himself to get persuasive—AKA, beg—nearly trips over himself in surprise.

"You—you can?"

Aaron squints at him for a second.

"You haven't done this before, have you?"

"Oh man," Peter groans. "Not you too. Look, I'm just trying to—"

"You mean I'm not the only one giving you crap about the fact you're clearly a thirteen-year-old girl?"

Under the mask, Peter turns the same shade as his suit.

"I told you, I'm a boy—a *man*! I'm Spider-Man, man, it's in the name!"

Aaron is unfazed.

"You are young though," he says. "Whatever. It doesn't matter to me. I already said I was gonna help you, didn't I?"

Peter falters.

"You are? But—that easy?"

"That easy."

"Um... why?"

Aaron shrugs. "You coulda been shot," he says, "but you jumped on top of me anyway. Why'd you do that?"

"I guess I just thought... you didn't wanna get shot. Did you... wanna get shot?"

"Nah. But I'm guessing you didn't either. And you jumped anyway."

Peter doesn't know what to say to this.

Aaron sighs. "Look," he says, "I got a nephew in this neighborhood. I don't want those weapons out there either."

And he gives Peter a time and place where the deal is gonna go down.

It's happening today.

It's easy. It's so much easier than Peter was anticipating that he almost lets Aaron go.

Almost.

"That'll dissolve in a couple hours," he says, already turning to leave. "You're a criminal, you deserve that."

Who lets too many people go now, *Daily Bugle*?

"Wait!" Aaron shouts after him. "I got sandwiches in the car!"

"Sandwich isn't gonna go bad in two hours, man, I promise you'll get your hoagie."

"Nah, I'm saying you should take one."

Peter turns back. Aaron's face isn't particularly expressive, but he doesn't seem to be joking. He shrugs.

"You're too skinny for a superhero," he says. "And besides, they're from Sub Haven. Best sandwich in Queens."

Peter might take issue with this last statement, but that doesn't stop him from taking the sandwich.

And in the end, he does let Aaron go.

By the time he approaches the Staten Island Ferry, Peter is feeling better than he has in days. He's had a full meal, he knows exactly what he's doing, his head is clear and he feels *focused* for the first time since—well, probably since the fiasco at the bank. He doesn't just *want* to help people this time—he actually knows how.

Just before he's about to take his leap, his cell phone rings.

Peter hesitates. He glances at the caller ID. It's the same number that texted him to meet on the rooftop on Friday.

It's Mr. Stark.

He silences it, and tucks it back into his boot.

Let Mr. Stark think what he wants. Peter has his own plan now.

Peter should probably expect it by now. In retrospect, he can't believe that he didn't.

The ferry falls apart.

Everything else does too.

(Bad things just happen.)

“Previously, on *Spider-Man Screws the Pooch*” —the Iron Man suit comes up from behind him, but Peter, sitting listlessly on the edge of the building where the garbage boat dumped him after carrying him away from the wrecked ferry, doesn’t look up— “I tell you to stay away from this, and instead you hack a multi-million dollar suit to stick your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

Peter, who is staring out over the water, says, “Is everyone okay?”

“No thanks to you.”

Peter wasn’t rearing for a fight this time. What happened out there, on the water—it was affirmation of everything Mr. Stark has ever said. Affirmation of everything Peter is. All the thoughts he had—of doing good for its own sake, of living up to being Spider-Man instead of just Peter Parker—disappeared the moment that ferry split in half.

But at this, something else breaks. Something in *him*. It’s that same little barrier that snapped in the lunchroom with Ned, and again with Michelle by the water fountain. That almost broke that night on the rooftop with Mr. Stark.

Now it gives way, and the flood rushes forth.

“No thanks to *me*?” Peter swings his legs over the wall, gets to his feet, doesn’t care that he’s so shaky he can barely stand. He approaches the suit. “I told you those weapons were out there. I told you! And you didn’t listen! None of this would have happened if you would just *listen to me!* *Nobody ever listens! Nobody cares!* You all act like you do but you *don’t* and you *never have!*”

He’s aware of the hysteric note in his voice, aware that tears are rising in his throat, but for once he doesn’t care, and he can’t stop them. He doesn’t control the flood anymore—the flood controls him.

Peter plows on.

“Everything I’ve ever asked you to do you just ignore it!” he says, just barely managing to keep his voice from sounding like a sob. “You shouldn’t have tracked me! You shouldn’t have looked at Peter Parker when I asked you not to! And now you’re going to lecture me about what’s my fault? *It’s not fair!*”

“Not *fair*?” Mr. Stark spits. “When in the hell was any of this ever supposed to be *fair*? You wanna talk about fair, Spider-Man, let’s talk about how fair it is that I’ve offered you help every step of the way and you’ve shot me down at every turn, huh? Let’s talk about the fact that you act like you keep that face covered because you’re protecting something, but actually it’s so you get to run around doing whatever you want without any oversight, because nobody can catch you when no

one knows your face, right? Why would you give that up when you can just live your superpowered life, carefree? Tell me, *Spidey*, didn't I just fight a goddamn war with my *friends* to make sure none of them could do that? So why the hell have I been letting you get away with it for so long?"

"You tell me," Peter shoots back. "You tell me, because you clearly don't give a shit about me. You're just like the rest of them, you don't care. If you cared at all you'd actually be here."

The suit bursts open, and Tony Stark steps out.

Peter stumbles back. His anger drains in a staggering rush, and in the absence of it something happens to his vision: suddenly he doesn't know where he is anymore. He's not on top of a building, being shouted at by Tony Stark. He's in the hallway outside his bedroom, just trying to get inside before Skip can accost him. But it's too late. He's bearing down, reaching for him—

Peter snaps back to himself just as Mr. Stark starts to yell.

"I don't care, huh?" he says, taking another step toward Peter. Peter takes a stumbling step backward, heart hammering, still blinking rapidly and trying to orient himself. "Who do you think called the FBI?"

Get it together, Parker!

Peter shakes his head. His voice is hoarse when he speaks, but at least he manages to say something.

What he says is this:

"Why didn't you just tell me that?"

Mr. Stark's face has remained almost calm despite the anger in his voice, but at this it twists, becomes ugly with anger.

"How about this? *I don't answer to you, Spider-Man*. And you? Apparently you don't answer to anyone. Do you know everyone else thought I was *crazy* to recruit some unknown *nobody* off the street without even learning his name? And guess what? I defended you, but now I'm starting to think that was a mistake. You hacked my suit, ignored every olive branch I've extended—did you even consider what I told you on the rooftop? I'm guessing not, since you went back to check up on Westcott. Only because you thought I wasn't looking, huh? Is that right? Do I about have the gist of it, Spidey? And now this. What if someone had died today, huh? That's on *you*, kid, did you ever think of that?"

"I don't—"

"And if you had died?" Mr. Stark throws his hands up. "I think that's on me. And just because I don't know the first thing about you—stupid on my part, I get it—I don't think I want that one on my conscience."

Something is starting to make sense in the back of Peter's mind, but he can't quite access it yet. It's too terrible. He just knows if he looks at it, he won't be able to handle it. He won't survive.

"I'm sorry," he croaks. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to help. I just—I just wanted to be like you."

I wanted to save the ones that no one else was saving.

“And I wanted you to be better.”

Peter closes his mouth.

Mr. Stark lowers his hands, grips his left wrist in his right hand. He sniffs, looks out toward the water, where the sun is beginning to set.

“Okay,” he says, “it’s not working out. I’m gonna need the suit back.”

It’s as though the whole world has narrowed to the width of a pinhead in the space of a second. Peter can’t see beyond the fury in Mr. Stark’s expression, can’t hear beyond the whine in the back of his head and the scream of the ghoul, who, at this, has started a furious, manic chant: *(You’re nothing, Peter Parker! You’re nothing! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!)*

“Please.” Peter hears his own voice, coming out of his mouth, but he doesn’t control it. “Please, Mr. Stark. I’m nothing without this suit.”

“If you’re nothing without this suit,” says Mr. Stark, “then you shouldn’t have it.”

The ground crumbles away.

This isn’t the start of the fall anymore. This is the moment he hits terminal velocity. The moment it’s too late to pull the chute. There’s nothing left to do but hit bottom.

When Peter doesn’t reply, Mr. Stark says, “You can give it to me, kid, or I can take it from you. I’m fine either way.”

Peter’s throat works. His breath catches. He says, “I don’t have my other mask.”

There’s a flash of something hot and dangerous in Mr. Stark’s eyes. Disbelief. Anger.

“Are we *really* still playing that game? Really? Right now? After *that*?”

“You promised,” Peter says.

Mr. Stark tightens his grip on his wrist, looks away again. He’s clearly battling to keep his anger below the surface, and it’s only barely working.

“Fine,” he says. “I’ll leave the coordinates in your suit, you can drop it at the dot in an hour. But if it’s not there, that’s your funeral, kid.”

When Mr. Stark gets back into his suit and flies away, it seems to happen in slow motion.

It takes a long time for Peter to realize Karen is talking to him.

“Peter? Peter? Peter, answer me.”

“I’m here,” Peter says.

Is he though? He’s not sure. Everything feels fuzzy and distant. He doesn’t feel real.

He’s taking the suit.

“Peter, please let me talk to Mr. Stark.”

There is a blinking red dot at the center of Peter’s visual display. It’s projected over a map of the

city—the dot shows the same sandwich shop where he and Mr. Stark first talked.

Peter might not be real, but this is.

“Peter?”

“I have to go, Karen,” says Peter numbly. “I’m sorry.”

He has to go. So he does.

(I always told you you were nothing, Peter.)

One More Time

Peter drops the suit off. There's no other choice.

He can't handle saying goodbye to Karen. He can't even handle talking to her as he makes his way back to the warehouse. She keeps trying to convince him to let her talk to Mr. Stark.

But what is Peter supposed to say?

Hey Mr. Stark, it's me, Spider-Man. The guy who blew up a ferry and nearly killed a hundred people. And if you didn't hate me enough for that, guess what? I'm also Peter Parker. You know, the kid you warned me to stay away from. I ran away from home and dropped out of school so I could lie to you full time about who I am and what I'm doing. Forgive me?

Peter saw the truth in Mr. Stark's eyes when he refused to take off the mask. He hates him.

There's no going back from this.

He mutes Karen. Doesn't unmute her even when he reaches the warehouse. Just pulls off the mask and the suit, fishes his old one out of the file cabinet, and heads to the drop-off location. He leaves it behind a dumpster in the back alley, along with a note, written on the back of an old receipt. It just says, "Sorry."

He doesn't really remember returning to the warehouse after that, but he gets there anyway. Crawls in through the window and pulls off his mask, lets it fall to the ground. Climbs under the desk and wraps himself in his filthy comforter, because even though it's still warm, not even dark yet, he can't stop shivering.

The article about Felipe is taped on the underside of the desk. Peter stares at it for a long time. Not reading. Just looking.

Some time passes, and the burner phone buzzes. It's still in his boot. Peter takes it out mechanically, flips it open.

Ned: *Saw u on the news. Exploding ferry?? Why do I miss all the cool stuff?? Was Mr. Stark mad at u? They said Iron Man showed up.*

Peter stares at the message for a long time before he understands what it says. Even when he does, he can't answer it.

He's about to flip it shut when he sees he has another message. A voicemail.

It's from Mr. Stark. He must have left it when he called earlier, just before the ferry happened. Peter doesn't really want to listen to it, but he's running on autopilot: he hits play.

"Hey kid. It's Tony. Look, I have a whole thing about, you know, mentorship and father figures, and my massive guilt complex is making me think I might have been a little harsh on the rooftop the other day. Let's chat when you have a chance."

The message ends, but Peter continues to hold the phone to his ear, as though it will suddenly start up again. As though this time it will be a message of forgiveness.

The phone, of course, is silent. The only technology that could have answered him is gone, left in a

folded pile behind a dumpster.

After a while though, Peter speaks.

“Help me.”

Once again, his voice doesn’t seem to be his own. But this time it is not the ghoul, speaking with his mouth. These are not the floodgates opening on his dammed-up anger. This is something else. Something sharp and painful and much more frightening, because as soon as Peter starts he can’t seem to stop.

“Help me,” he says. “Help me. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what—I don’t know what to do. Please, please, help. Please help. Please help. Please—”

But no matter how many times he says it, there is no reply. No voice waiting in the darkness. Even the ghoul has gone silent.

Peter is alone.

He wakes the next morning with the phone still clutched in his right hand, his eyes so swollen he has to rub them for what feels like a full minute before he can see properly. When the filmy haze is finally gone from his vision, the first thing he sees is that his phone is almost dead—the battery sign is blinking on the screen.

No wonder: there’s a chilly dew covering everything this morning, including the phone, and Peter’s blankets. His hands are stiff with cold. Autumn seems to have made its first appearance overnight.

It’s only going to get colder from here.

The inevitable change of seasons registers only laterally. Peter’s thoughts are consumed by a different change, one that is only starting to feel real as he flexes his fingers mechanically, trying to will some warmth into them but mostly staring at the fingerless gloves of his old costume:

Mr. Stark took his suit.

Karen is gone.

Spider-Man is gone too.

It’s just Peter now.

He should get up. He knows this, somewhere distant in his mind, but he can’t think *why*. The one thing that has been driving him to untangle himself from these blankets every morning is gone, taken away—and, he now realizes, was never really his to begin with. Because he didn’t deserve it.

He didn’t stop Skip. He didn’t save any kids like him, didn’t get the halfway house shut down. He couldn’t even stop one bad guy from blowing up a ferry full of people. Even the girls don’t need him. They never really did: they’ve always been safe. Peter’s always known even if he couldn’t admit it that going back there was more for him than for them—and at this point, he is just the spectre at their window. In a few years they probably won’t even remember him.

Spider-Man was as much of a failure as Peter Parker always has been.

So why should he get up?

The phone, still clutched in his right hand, buzzes feebly.

It's Ned.

Ned: *Getting kind of worried over here my dude. R u hurt? Please talk to your guy in the chair*

Ned is worried about him. It doesn't make Peter feel better, but it does spark something in his mind, something beyond the blank stretch of numbness that has taken up residence there since he fell asleep last night. The spark is a realization: the last time Peter disappeared before he cost Ned his happiness, and all of his friends.

What will he cost him if he disappears again?

It's almost not enough. It *isn't* enough, not really, not in the long term. But it gets Peter moving. He rolls out from under the desk and opens the middle file drawer. Stares at the dwindling pile of food for a minute, then closes it without taking anything.

He changes into his street clothes. Opens the phone.

Peter: *I'm okay.*

It sends. The phone dies.

Peter heads out.

Peter charges the phone at the library—just sits at an empty table and cushions his head on his arms, watches the battery slowly fill. He's not thinking anything. He's not feeling anything either.

On the way home, though, Peter does feel something: that something is horror.

He's not paying attention to where he's headed. He usually swings back to the warehouse, but he didn't take his old suit with him today—just left it crumpled on the floor after he took it off. So he walks, head down, ignoring the curses and hisses when he bumps into strangers, turning down streets automatically and not thinking about where he is going until the back of his neck starts to tingle.

Peter looks up automatically, danger signals flaring weakly, thinking there must be a mugging going down nearby.

But there is no mugging. When Peter raises his head, he finds himself face-to-face with—

Himself.

Peter has to blink rapidly a few times to be sure he isn't imagining things. He's not: that's his face—only it's a little younger, wearing glasses and a tight, nervous expression that Peter is sure must be reflected on his real, older face now.

That's the picture they took of him at the police station, the night Ben died. It's the picture CPS keeps in his file.

And now it's on a poster, blown up almost to life-size proportions and taped to a pole right in front of him, right in the middle of his old neighborhood.

MISSING

Peter Benjamin Parker

DOB: 08/26/02

Peter's mouth feels numb.

It's been almost six months. *Six months*, and no one has come looking for him the whole time. Why would they start now?

There's only one thing that's changed in the last week: Mr. Stark looked into him.

As soon as Peter thinks it, the poster makes perfect sense.

Mr. Stark wasn't telling him to stay away from "that Parker kid" just because he thought he was dangerous. He was saying to stay away from him because it was pointless to try to help. Peter should have known this, should have guessed: as soon as Mr. Stark realized Peter Parker might be a threat to Spider-Man, a threat to one of his team, he was going to come after him. It was only a matter of time.

Peter doubts very much that their falling out is going to stop Mr. Stark now. The wheel is in motion, and Mr. Stark isn't one to halt it just because the circumstances have been tweaked. He never listened when Spider-Man told him to stop looking, so why would he do so now that Spider-Man is lower than dirt to him?

Peter is so caught up in this breathless realization it takes him a long time to realize where the poster is hanging. He only discovers where his thoughtless feet have carried him when he finally manages to tear his eyes away:

He's standing in front of Mr. Delmar's.

The storefront is still boarded up, but the cleanup team has made a lot of progress in a short amount of time. The broken glass is gone; new bricks have been laid. There is even a sign on the front door that says, "*We will re-open in October.*"

Next to this are two more missing posters with Peter's face on them.

This is it: the very last thing. Peter was going to return here, come to Mr. Delmar and ask for his job back. It was going to be the thing that let him survive.

And now Mr. Delmar will know Peter lied. He will know Peter is missing. He probably already does.

There's nothing left.

Peter runs.

There's another stretch of blankness before he finds himself in the warehouse again. They're coming more frequently now. With no one to talk him out of the darkness, Peter just allows it.

There's nothing left, but somehow this nothingness lends a clarity that has been absent for weeks: at last, Peter knows what he has to do.

He can't go back to Delmar's. He can't go to Mr. Stark. His food is running out, and he doesn't have enough money to survive the winter. He doesn't even have enough to make it out of the city. Even if he did, they'd probably catch him the second he tried to board the bus. Every kind of public transportation is littered with security cameras, and as he knows from Karen, Stark tech can't be stopped by closed circuits.

No more running. No more choices.

He has to turn himself in.

Maybe they'll just send him to jail this time.

As far as hope goes, it doesn't feel like much.

But then, at the moment, nothing really does.

The recognition of his lack of choices isn't a terror. Nor is it a relief. It just is. Peter has to turn himself in, because there's no other option.

So he will.

He just has a few things to take care of first.

Ned: *R u still coming tonight? Tried not to, but I may have told a few people you'd be there.*

Peter: *Wouldn't miss it :) :)*

Ned: *You are literally the greatest omg. Homecoming will never be the same again.*

He almost turns back when he hears the laughter.

It's Saturday evening—Homecoming. Peter has no idea how he made it to the school—some switch has flipped since Mr. Stark took away the suit, and it's like all the hunger and fatigue he's been keeping just barely at bay has come rising up in a great deluge. For the last twenty-four hours he's barely been able to see straight from it, so the fact that he somehow managed to don his old suit and swing to Midtown has to be some sort of small miracle, and yet here he is—crouched in the bushes outside the school's main entrance, wearing his suit but not his mask because he wants to be able to see when the river of arriving students slows to the point where he can sneak inside and make his grand entrance.

But now that he's actually about to do it, it's starting to feel like a terrible idea.

On the one hand, the adrenaline of realizing he's about to swing into a gymnasium full of his peers wearing his patched-up, stained, filthy old suit has finally brought the spark back to his sluggish thoughts. On the other hand, the numbness and silence of the past two days has been replaced by a single, shrieking question. That question is this:

What the hell am I doing?

It's like walking into a dream. Not the school—Peter has been here plenty even since he disappeared—but seeing it full of *people*. It feels wrong, somehow—like they're throwing a party in a graveyard. Everyone is so clean bright and *young*, and Peter can't imagine how he ever fit in among them.

He can't imagine how he's going to fit in among them now. He doesn't even look like Spider-Man anymore.

“Way to go out with a bang, Parker,” he mutters, watching Betty Brant flounce up the front steps in a sparkling blue dress, chatting and laughing with the boy who does the morning news with her, whose name Peter can't remember. “They're not going to think this is cool. They're probably going to arrest you for being a creepy vagrant.”

It's a stupid, stupid idea, and Peter is fully aware that he definitely should not be here. Not like this. But it's his chance to make just a little bit of what he's done up to Ned. His last chance. Because once Peter hands himself over, he has no way of knowing where they'll take him. He might never see Ned again after tonight.

(Unless they give you back to Skip.)

Peter gasps, slams his eyes shut. The ghoul, strangely, has been almost silent since Mr. Stark took the suit, but this whisper is particularly vicious, perfectly clear. It's so clear it sets his eyes watering. Has him wanting to run all over again. Not just away from the school, but away from everything. The city. The decision laid out before him, which is the only one left.

“I'm doing this,” he says, trying to sound firm. “I owe it to Ned.”

He waits for a reply. But the ghoul has once again gone silent.

Peter opens his eyes.

It's nearly time. The cars are thinning out. There are just a few stragglers now, kids who are running behind because they took too long with their hair or because their parents took too many pictures of them with their dates and their corsages.

Peter receives a renewed rush of surreality when Liz Toomes steps out of one of these late cars, looking beautiful in a short pink dress and holding hands with a very nervous-looking Andrew Davies from decathlon. In a different life that might have been Peter, holding her hand. But this is such a distant notion it doesn't even feel disappointing. It feels, like so much has since the ferry, flat.

Peter watches Liz and Andrew make their way up the steps, smiling shyly at one another, and then he reaches for his mask. Just as he is about to pull it on, however, the car from which Liz emerged pulls past the bush where Peter is concealed.

And Peter sees the man driving it.

He's never met Liz's dad. He knows he never has. But he recognizes the driver.

It's the man from the ferry.

Since Ben died, Peter has learned many things.

He's learned that fairness is a fairy tale, a story parents tell their kids to help them sleep at night, but which is not, and has never been, something that exists in the real world. (*Bad things just happen.*) He's learned that love and kindness and compassion are fleeting, and that the people who provide them come and go like breaths of air. (*You have to look out for yourself, Peter.*) He's learned, too, that happiness is not meant for everyone. It's certainly not meant for him.

These are the lessons that have brought him here, to this moment, where by fate or coincidence or some unseen, unsummoned force, he is suddenly staring into the face of a man he once thought would be his redemption. A man whose capture was supposed to make Peter the sort of hero he wanted to be.

But Peter isn't thinking any of these things as he watches the man drive by. He's not thinking of fate, or heroism, or even of redemption. He's thinking of the one lesson he received *before* Ben died. The one that has stayed with him throughout everything else:

Responsibility is not a choice.

Right then, in that moment, it doesn't matter that he isn't Spider-Man anymore. It doesn't matter that Mr. Stark hates him, or that he's exhausted and hungry and filthy, or that he feels less like a superhero than he has ever felt—less than he did before the spider bit him. All that matters is that people are in danger, and that somehow, for some reason, Peter is the only person who can stop it.

It's not a choice.

It's a responsibility.

The burner phone is in Peter's boot. Without thinking, he pulls it out. Flips it open

And presses the panic button.

The screen lights up, displaying a pixelated alarm bell, but Peter only looks at it for a second, just for confirmation, and then he throws the phone right at Toomes' car and shoots a web after it. The phone hits the car's bumper with a muffled thump. The web holds it in place.

The car rounds a corner and disappears into the night.

Peter barely has time to pull on his mask, straightening up as he does, before Ned comes bursting

out of the front doors of the school, phone in one hand, breathing heavily and looking in the direction in which Toomes' car just took off. He looks like he's about to run after it.

Luckily, he spots Peter first.

"The panic button!" Ned says, running down the steps. "The phone! What happened?"

Peter grabs Ned by the arm and yanks him into the bushes.

"Ned!" His voice is strangled with disbelief. "The guy with the alien weapons is *Liz's dad*. I just saw him drop her off!"

"*What?* What are you talking about? Peter, how—where's your suit?"

But there's no time, no time to explain, to apologize, to think about what he's about to do—no time for any of it. He just has to go.

"Ned, I need to borrow your phone. And I need you to be my guy in the chair. I have to follow him, and I need you to help me. Can you help me?"

Ned—heroic, life-saving Ned—lights up like a Christmas tree. He hands his phone over.

"Yes. Yes, finally, yes. I'll—I'll call you from the computer lab," he says. "Oh my god, it's happening. But—how are you gonna catch him? You can't track him and web-sling, and you don't even have a car."

"I'll think of something," Peter says. "Just go!"

Ned nods. He runs up the steps. Peter, desperate, shaking, stares around for something—anything —

And he sees Flash, pulling up to the curb in his dad's convertible.

Peter might not get to make his Homecoming appearance, but at the very least, he gives Flash something to talk about.

Ned's tracker works.

It takes Peter right to the river, to an abandoned warehouse where Peter waits in the shadows on the ceiling just long enough to hear Toomes, speaking into a cell phone, say something about an airplane, and Avengers Tower, and then he decides he's heard enough.

He drops into the center of the open space, arms held wide.

"Surprised to see me?" says Peter.

Toomes is surprised.

But as it turns out, he has a few surprises of his own.

For the second time in three days, everything around Peter crumbles.

This time, though, it's real.

Consciousness comes to Peter's body first: by the time he arrives in it, aware and in agony, he is already gasping and clawing at the rubble, trying to free himself on instinct.

Instantly, Peter feels panic, more sudden, more all-encompassing than anything he's felt in his life. It's worse than an asthma attack, because this time the tightness in his lungs is just an extension of the tightness all around as cement and rebar press in from every angle, squeezing the air out of him more effectively than asthma ever did, more effectively than a hand over his mouth or around his neck, and so Peter is sure he is going to die from it. He's sure in a way he's never been sure about anything, but rather than resignation, he feels a terrible, screaming fear.

Somewhere in his constricted throat and lungs, Peter finds words.

"Help," he chokes. "Help! I'm stuck, I can't move, please, I can't—somebody—anybody—!"

The strangled cry echoes off the surrounding buildings and then dies on the stiff night air.

No one is coming. Toomes chose this place because no one is nearby.

Peter sucks in a breath of air that is heavy with dust and silt and looks down. There is a pool of stagnant water in front of his face, probably from a burst pipe or old rainwater that shifted in the collapse. His mask lies half-submerged in it, and in the moonlight he can see his face, pallid and sunken and scared, cast against the mottled red of his filthy mask.

Mr. Stark's words rise in his head, spectral:

If you're nothing without this suit, you shouldn't have it.

Immediately, the ghoul delivers its rejoinder:

(But you've always known you were nothing, Peter Parker. It's what I've been telling you all along.)

There are tears pouring down his face. Peter tries to swallow them back, but swallowing is painful, makes his ribcage press harder into the already-tight space of the rubble all around him. Peter holds his breath, therefore, as he braces himself, places his hands on the jagged piece of cement directly beneath him and tries to lever himself against it, to shift the weight on his back.

"Come on, Spider-Man," he whispers, "come on, Spider-Man, you can do this."

Above him, the rubble moves, just a little. But not enough. Peter's arms give out. He collapses back onto his chest and the rubble comes with him, pressing harder now, almost choking the sob that escapes him as he goes down.

He can't do this. He can't, he can't, *he can't*, it's too much and he's too weak, he never should have followed Toomes here, he can't take care of himself and he can't save anyone else because it's just like Mr. Stark said: he was never good enough for this. He was never Spider-Man. He was only ever Peter Parker, small and scared and alone, and whatever powers were given to him were given by a fluke, a random coincidence he didn't deserve.

Peter lowers his arms. He groans as the rubble cuts deeper into his back. He closes his eyes.

When he opens them, he's not in the ruined warehouse anymore.

He is in a dark place, still flat on his stomach, still feeling the crushing weight above him, impending downward, but there is no rubble to be seen. There is nothing, actually, just darkness stretching on and on into infinity.

Peter is lying in a bed. His cheek is on a sweat-soaked pillow and he can feel his body pressing into the mattress, even though all he can see is the dark.

There is a foul stench on the air. Beer and sweat and blood. Distantly, he can hear something moving, a rustling sound like bare feet on carpet.

His heart starts to pound.

Peter swallows. Tries to lift his arms. He can't move. He can barely breathe. He opens his mouth to call for help, but no sound comes out.

And yet, even though Peter is silent, suddenly Ben is there.

It's just as before. Ben is dressed in the outfit he died in, work boots and a brown leather jacket. Once again, he looks like he's been crying.

This time, though, Ben does not sit across from Peter. He walks straight to the bed and crouches beside it, clenches one hand on the edge of the mattress and looks Peter in the face.

He's close enough Peter could touch him, if only he could raise his arms.

"Peter." Ben's whisper is low, edging on frantic. "Buddy, you have to get up. You can't stay here, come on."

Tears start once again to pour down Peter's cheeks, further dampening the pillow.

"Ben," he gasps, his voice raw and wrecked. "I'm sorry, I can't. I can't. It's too much."

"I know. Peter, I know. It is too much. It's so much more than you ever should have had to do. I wish I could do it for you, honey, you have no idea how much I wish that, but I can't. You have to do this yourself. Just one more time. You can, I know you can."

The shuffling sound is getting closer.

Peter closes his eyes, shakes his head.

"I'm sorry," he says, "I tried, I did, I tried, but I just can't. I tried to be better, Ben. I tried to save them, but I couldn't."

"*Peter.*"

"I'm not strong enough." Peter chokes on another gasp. "Mr. Stark was right. I'm not strong enough for Spider-Man. I'm not strong enough for any of it."

"Peter Parker, you look at me right now."

The sudden harshness of Ben's voice is enough to make Peter open his eyes. There is a fire in his uncle's expression, more intense than anything Peter remembers seeing when he was alive.

“Listen to me,” Ben says, as the sound of footsteps draws nearer, “you listen to me, Peter. Spider-Man was never, ever the strong one. That was always you.”

“I’m not—”

“Who survived that car crash, Peter? Who stayed strong and found his way back to being the smart, happy, wonderful kid he was meant to be after his parents died? Who defended himself against the Arlingtons? Who saved Felipe? Who protected those little girls when no one in the world was looking closely enough to see anything was wrong? That wasn’t Spider-Man. That was *you*. You are the strong one. You are the strongest person I have ever known. Don’t you dare let anyone make you think differently. Not even Tony Stark.”

Peter’s throat is tight. The feet are close now, so close they are almost here.

“What if it’s too hard?” he whispers.

They both know he isn’t just talking about getting back up.

At last, Ben reaches across the short distance between them and cups Peter’s cheek in his hand. It’s warm, rough and calloused like it was in real life. Peter leans into it as much as he can while still pinned to the bed.

“I told you once that you were allowed to defend yourself,” he says. “And Peter, you are. But I should have told you so much more than that. It’s not just looking out for yourself, or fighting all of the bad things. You are allowed to demand good things too. You are allowed to demand respect and kindness and compassion. You are allowed to ask for help. Because you are a good and kind and compassionate person. And you are so strong. Just do this one last thing, honey. Use that strength this one last time, so you can go out and get all the love you deserve. You deserve so much, Peter. Just be strong for me one more time.”

From nearby comes the sound of a door creaking open.

And Peter nods. He sets his jaw. He braces himself, and raises his arms.

Peter lifts.

The dark place melts away. There is no more smell of alcohol, no more muffled footsteps, no more bed. He is back in the warehouse, back under the cement, but it is shifting, rising as Peter pushes upward.

“Come on Spider-Man,” he says again, the words practically a sob. Then, “Come on Peter. Come on Peter, you can do it, come on, come on Peter, *come on, Peter—!*”

And all at once he is standing. The weight falls away, and as it does a great flood of relief and grief and awe threaten to bring Peter crashing back down.

He doesn’t let them. He staggers once, disbelieving, but he does not fall. Instead, Peter fills his aching lungs, grabs his mask from the water, and turns his eyes skyward.

One more time. One more time for Ben.

Peter leaps.

Everything around him is on fire. Peter can feel the heat from all directions, boring through his suit, searing his skin and making his eyes water. There is a stench of blood and gasoline in the air, nauseating and metallic, but there's no more fear in Peter's heart, no more clench in his chest, even though his mask is gone and Toomes is gazing up at him—the real him. No more Spider-Man. Only Peter Parker, exposed before the man he just defeated.

Peter is bleeding—bleeding from his nose and mouth and shoulder and probably other places, places he can't see or feel. He hurts everywhere, the kind of hurt that almost doesn't seem real, because it's coming from too many places to know any one of them. He has no idea how he's still on his feet.

And yet, he is.

Toomes, on the other hand, is slumped against a stack of crates, his wingsuit ruined. He makes no attempt to get up. He couldn't even if he tried. Peter has webbed him there, to be collected by whoever gets here first.

Peter has won.

For once, it was enough. *He* was enough.

"I know who you are."

Peter, who was in the process of turning away from Toomes, to head back into the night before the sirens he can hear in the distance get any closer, turns back.

He says nothing. Toomes goes on anyway.

"You're that Parker kid, aren't you?"

Still, Peter doesn't reply.

"You are," says Toomes. "My daughter used to talk about you all the time. Really cut her up when you disappeared, you know. She said you were the smartest kid she's ever known." He smiles wryly. "Guess she was right, huh?"

"I'm not that smart."

"Coulda had me fooled. I've been doing this for eight years and no one's come near me before tonight. That makes you smart in my book, Pedro."

"Don't call me that."

Toomes grins.

"Sorry. It's Peter, isn't it?"

Peter stares down at him for a beat, trying to conjure some feeling for the man who almost just killed him. All he comes up with is a vague pity, but it's not for him. It's for Liz. He should have taken better care of her. He should have been a better parent.

"Are you gonna tell anyone?" says Peter flatly.

He doesn't know if it matters anymore. But Toomes shakes his head, slowly, eyes narrowed.

“You saved my life.” Toomes nods at Peter’s hands, scalded from lifting the ruined wingsuit off him. “That earns you a favor. Just one though. If we ever cross paths again...”

He lets the rest of the threat go unsaid.

Peter just nods. Then he turns away. His mask is on the beach; he scoops it up. He can barely stand, but he somehow manages to fling a web at the Cyclone, lets it carry him away from the beach—and then away from it all. From the wrecked plane, from Toomes, from Coney Island itself. He heads back into the city.

There’s one last thing he has to do.

The lights are still on in Skip’s apartment when Peter arrives there forty-five minutes later. At first he’s surprised—it feels like a full year has passed since he left the school—but it’s still relatively early. Earlier than he usually comes here. It’s Saturday, too, so the girls might have stayed up late.

Skip is probably awake too.

Peter feels a churning disappointment in his stomach as he heaves himself onto the seventh story fire escape, but he doesn’t turn back.

He had planned on coming here all along. Before Toomes, before the plane, he had just planned on saying goodbye to Emma, one last time, as Spider-Man. If he couldn’t be her superhero anymore, he figured the least he could do was let her know why. Let her know it wasn’t her fault.

But Toomes did happen. The warehouse happened, the plane happened.

Peter tells himself he’s still coming to say goodbye. But if he’s really honest with himself—and his faculties are rapidly dwindling with each searing breath, his whole body a chorus of aches and pains rising to a crescendo that has almost wiped out his ability to lie to himself, much less other people—he came here for the same reason he came the night Mr. Stark caught him.

He just wants to be around people he loves. People who love him back.

So, even though the lights are on and he can hear Lily and Emma’s voices in the kitchen, mingling with the lower rumble of Skip’s, Peter doesn’t leave. He sits on the fire escape underneath the girls’ bedroom window and leans against the brick wall, clutching his ribs and catching his breath, trying to stave off the distant cold that has been building in his body since he left the beach long enough to see them. They’ll go to bed soon, and then he can stand up. He just has to wait.

But Peter is tired. The wound in his shoulder is still bleeding sluggishly, and he can taste blood on his teeth, too. He knows he’s injured, and he knows his healing factor is probably completely out of whack from the mess of the last few days—no sleep, no food, no healing. Maybe he’ll feel better if he just lets his eyes close for a little while. Maybe if he just lets go, just for a second—

But just as Peter’s eyes are about to slide closed, they snap open again as an unexpected sound makes its way through the girls’ cracked bedroom window. It’s a voice—a different voice. Not the girls’. Not Skip’s.

It sounds like a boy’s voice.

Peter's heart starts to somersault. All thoughts of sleep are erased. All *thoughts* are erased—his mind fills with a wordless, instinctive fear.

The fear drives Peter back to his feet, back to the brick wall. He practically has to hold his breath to keep from hyperventilating as he creeps around the side of the apartment building, to the window that looks in on the kitchen and the living room.

And Peter really *does* stop breathing then.

It's not just the familiarity of the scene—the girls and Skip, gathered around a table piled high with food, laughing and chatting. It's not just that he hasn't seen Skip in almost six months, or that he seems to have gotten larger, somehow, in the intervening time, as though the beast concealed behind his good-dad facade is straining harder and harder to break free of his human skin. It's not just that Skip is smiling, leaning back in his chair easily, as though he's never done anything wrong, as though he deserves every bit of what surrounds him.

It's that there's a boy at the table.

He looks younger than Peter, but not by much. Thirteen, maybe—just about the age Peter was when Ben died. He has brown skin and dark hair and he's sitting slightly hunched in his chair, watching the girls out of the corner of his eye, like he doesn't quite understand what he's doing there. Peter knows that look well. He wore it himself when he first came here.

A terrible revelation is building in Peter's head. Something he should have known all along, but which is only becoming clear now, as he stares down at this repeated scene from his own life and realizes that it has happened before.

(To date I've fostered six young men.)

Skip has a beer in his left hand. As Peter watches he takes a sip, turns toward the new boy.

(I've always been in control, Peter, you have to believe me.)

Skip reaches across the table and takes the boy's hand in his own.

(You've always been such a good boy.)

Peter swings through the living room window.

Glass bursts inward, shredding Peter's suit even further, shredding the skin beneath, but he doesn't feel it. Everyone turns toward him, but they don't even have time to scream before Peter leaps across the living room and into the dining area.

Skip only has time to get to his feet, mouth open, fists curling, before Peter brings his own fist smashing down across his face.

Skip flies back. He hits the kitchen island. Slumps down against it and stays there, still and silent, a trickle of blood making its way down his forehead.

There is a moment of utter, utter silence.

Peter, stunned, stares down at what he's done. Skip's chest is moving—he's alive—but he's unconscious. He's not getting back up.

Then Lily starts to scream.

The world comes rushing back in. Peter whirls around, sees that the kids have all stood up, and the boy has grabbed the girls, is trying to pull them away from Peter, toward the bedrooms. The boy is wild-eyed with fear and Lily is shrieking but Emma—Emma is only looking at Skip. Her expression is hard and scrutinizing and far, far too knowing for such a young face.

“I’m sorry,” Peter says. His voice is so hoarse it barely makes a sound. He tries again. “Please, don’t cry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Lily, I’m so sorry, please don’t be upset, please don’t cry, please, I’m—”

“Lily,” says Emma. “Stop it.”

Miraculously, Lily does. And the boy stops dragging them backward. All three of them stare at Emma, who Peter has never heard speak like that, who he can’t believe *could* speak like that, especially after what just happened.

Emma stares at Skip for another beat, then raises her eyes to Peter’s mask.

“Daddy’s a bad guy,” she says, “isn’t he?”

Little sobs begin to rise in Peter’s chest. He chokes them back, but he can’t speak. He nods. And then, fingers shaking so hard he can barely find the edges of it, he reaches up and takes off the mask.

Lily and the boy go very, very still. Lily’s mouth drops open. But Emma’s face doesn’t change at all. She doesn’t look surprised. She looks like she knew all along.

Peter knows he’s crying. He can feel the tears on his face, but can’t stop them.

“Peter?” says Lily.

“Yeah Lily. It’s me.”

“You’re the kid who used to live here,” says the boy. “They told me you ran away. It was because of him, wasn’t it?”

Peter nods. “I’m so sorry,” he says. “I’m so sorry, you guys, I—”

Before he can go any further, Emma breaks free from the boy’s grip and approaches Peter. She takes his hand and squeezes it.

“It’s okay,” she says.

Peter knows if he looks at her too long he’ll never hold it together. So he just clings to her hand, looks up at the other two, imploring. Lily’s face is still shocked, disbelieving, but the boy’s is going hard.

“I’m sorry,” says Peter again, “but we have to get out of here.”

The boy spares one last disgusted look at Skip’s unconscious body. Then he looks up at Peter.

“Yeah man,” he says, “let’s fuckin’ go.”

The boy's name is Manny. He tells Peter this as they slip into a back alley. Peter is wearing his mask, carrying Emma. Manny carries Lily, who is sobbing gently into his shoulder, moaning for her dad.

He can't ask Manny if anything happened. Not yet. He knows it might actually kill him if the answer is yes, because if the answer is yes it's all his fault. He's the only one who knew the truth, and he left. Peter's guilt feels more like a knife than any of his physical wounds, but he can't turn back now, has to keep them all moving, moving toward anything that isn't Skip.

They walk through back alleys and along abandoned streets, panting and crying and not talking—just moving.

He can't take the kids back to the warehouse. He barely survived there—he would never be able to keep them all alive. But he doesn't know anywhere that he could. He's still trapped, still can't go to Mr. Delmar or Mr. Stark—except now he can't even go to CPS, because CPS are the ones who put them all with Skip in the first place. And they already think Peter is trouble. There's no way they'll believe him after what he just did.

That leaves just one person. They need help, any help, and this entire time there has only been one person who has ever offered it willingly, without question, and without asking for anything in return. Peter already hates himself for taking advantage of that, but he doesn't have any other choice.

The lights are still on at Midtown High when the four kids arrive—Homecoming is still in full swing. But Peter doesn't take them through the front doors. He brings them around the back, shows Manny how to dodge the security cameras as they carry the girls through the bus entrance and down the back hallway, into the gym locker room where Peter has spent so many evenings showering and avoiding looking in the mirror.

He avoids it now, too. Once the door is shut behind them he sets Emma down and crouches in front of her.

"I need you guys to stay here," he says. "Don't answer the door for anyone but me or Ned, okay? You remember Ned, right? He's gonna help us. I just have to go get him."

Emma nods. So does Manny. Lily is still crying too hard to say anything, but Peter can't wait. He slips out of the locker room and dashes down the hall, toward the computer lab, praying that Ned hasn't gone back to the party, praying he won't run into anyone else on the way—

He rounds a corner and Ned is there. Not in the computer lab but just outside it, peering through the window as though he is trying to see the screens without going inside.

"Ned!" Peter hisses, pulling off the mask.

Ned whips around, eyes wide, and comes jogging up to Peter, who pulls him around the corner.

For once, there is no humor in Ned's expression. He looks frightened as he grips Peter by the arm, imploring.

"Peter," he whispers, "you're on the news."

"I know," Peter gasps; there is a sharp pain in his side that has grown sharper since they ran, and now it's so bad he can barely breathe through it. He does anyway. "I know, the plane. But—"

Ned shakes his head. "Not the plane, Peter. I mean, yes, the plane, but that's not all they're saying.

Peter—it's Skip."

Peter's heart plummets into his shoes.

"They cut into the plane stuff," Ned goes on, his voice high-pitched and hoarse with terror.

"Breaking News. Skip was on it, and he was all bloody, he was saying—Peter, he said Spider-Man kidnapped his kids. What the hell is he talking about? One of the chaperones kicked me out of the lab before I could hear more, I don't have my phone—please tell me he's making it up."

Peter reaches out, matches Ned's grip with his own. Not to hold him there, but to hold himself upright as he takes a shattering breath and lowers his head, tears dripping down the end of his nose.

"Ned," he says, "I didn't leave Skip's because of Spider-Man."

When Ned doesn't reply, Peter forces himself to look up. Ned is gazing down at him, mouth open, and the fear that was present in his expression before is morphing, turning into a fear of a different sort.

Peter sees it—the moment Ned understands. He sees everything that was safe and comforting fall away—not just for Ned, but for him. Suddenly Peter isn't the heroic friend who ran away to fight crime and make the world a better place. He is the coward who only wanted to save himself. Who was too weak to fight, so he ran.

It's everything he feared when he thought about telling Ned the truth. But there's nothing he can do about it now. The night isn't over yet.

"Peter, I'm—"

"I need your help," says Peter. "I can't—I can't let them go back there. Please, I'm so sorry to drag you into this, but I need somewhere to take them, somewhere no one is gonna look. They're gonna come looking for me, Ned, it's already on the news, and they can't—they can't take them back. They *can't*. But I don't know where else to go."

For the first time Peter can ever remember, Ned is speechless. He doesn't even look like he's breathing. He just keeps staring.

"No one knows I'm a kid," says Peter desperately. "No one knows I know you. I just need enough time to come up with a plan. Please. Please Ned."

"I don't—Peter, my parents—"

"I can help you."

Peter and Ned turn so sharply they both stumble. Michelle is standing behind them, wearing a dress and clutching her phone and looking more shaken than Peter has ever seen her look.

"I followed Ned," she says, before either of them can ask. "I've been following him all night."

"Michelle," Peter croaks. "I'm not—"

"It's okay." She glances over her shoulder and then steps toward them, clutching her arms around herself but with the same expression of determination she wore when she cornered Peter by the drinking fountains all those months ago. "I knew. I suspected." She swallows. "I suspected all of it, but I was pissed at you. I should have helped you, Peter. I'm really sorry."

Peter takes a shuddering breath.

“Can you help me now?”

Michelle nods.

“My parents are out of town. They’ll be gone all week. We can take the kids to my place.”

Peter feels his knees give out. Ned grips him harder, keeps him standing, but Peter still has to squeeze his eyes shut for a second before he can hold himself on his own.

When he opens them, both of his friends are staring at him, waiting.

“You guys have to take them,” Peter says. “If they know Spider-Man took them they’re going to come looking for me. I can lead them away, buy you enough time to get them safe. I’ll come find you when the coast is clear. Okay?”

Ned and Michelle both nod.

“I don’t—you guys, I’m so—”

“It’s okay, Peter.” Michelle nods, stands straighter. “We’re gonna help you.”

Peter wants to say more. He wants to tell her how grateful he is, how much it means that she isn’t asking questions, that she is just *there*, even though he was so awful to her, even though he doesn’t deserve it. But he doesn’t have the words, and there’s no time to find them.

One last time, Peter pulls on the mask.

End of Part II

A Series of Mistakes

Part Three

Truth

His head is throbbing.

He knows this is probably to be expected—considering the number of hits he took without his suit, it’s actually kind of a miracle the pain is so localized. Still, when he can finally slump over and close his eyes the relief is wonderful, even if it does only last a second.

“My left arm is numb,” he says, while Natasha crosses the room toward him. “Is that normal?”

She’s watching Ross leave through the glass doors, and he can tell she doesn’t want to speak until she’s sure he’s gone. When Ross disappears around a corner, she puts a hand on Tony’s shoulder—an unexpected but welcome gesture of camaraderie—and says, “Are you alright?”

Tony is not alright, but he doesn’t feel like it would be very fair to say that just now. They were all in the same fight. They all saw Barnes go full Manchurian Candidate on half the team—and win. They all know what will happen if he and Steve get across the border. He doesn’t have to rehash it for Natasha.

Instead, Tony says, “Thirty-six hours. Jeez.”

“We’re seriously understaffed.”

They are. And Natasha’s talent for understatement is seriously understated.

“Be great if we had a Hulk right about now,” says Tony. “Any shot?”

Natasha smiles wryly. “You really think he’d be on our side?”

Again, this doesn’t seem like the time to answer that question.

When Tony says nothing, Natasha sighs. “I have an idea,” she says.

Tony does too.

Tony’s known about the spider guy pretty much since the moment he swung onto the scene back in the early spring: Ever since Ultron, Tony’s made it his business to know about any potentially-enhanced individuals, be they man or machine—but unlike with, say, Wanda, he’s let this one slide, just a little bit. Irresponsible? Maybe. Reckless? Probably. But seeing as spider guy has never *hurt* anyone—hell, the worst damage he’s done is dent a few fenders while catching flying cars,

which is the superhero equivalent of dropping a few eggs in the kitchen—and seeing as Tony has had a few other things on his mind lately, he’s given himself a pass on this one. Besides, aren’t Recklessness and Irresponsibility his middle names? At least according to the press. And Pepper, when she finally packed her things three months ago. They might not be great titles as far as relationships go, but they’ve gotten him through nearly ten years of being Iron Man, and as far as Tony is concerned that’s a pretty damn good record.

So he didn’t look into the new guy as closely as he probably should have.

It’s an oversight Tony starts to regret only when he has to actually *find* the guy.

It’s supposed to be easy. He’s Tony Stark, for god’s sake—how hard can it be to find one guy in a bright red costume who shoots webs from his wrists and spends his afternoons dragging muggers out of back alleys to face justice at the hands of the police? Tony has FRIDAY run through all known footage of the guy while he makes his way to New York, confident he’ll have an ID by the time he lands. His plan is to catch him off his guard, while he’s at home—but it’s a plan that goes quickly awry. Because by the time he’s flying over Jersey, FRIDAY has come up with precisely—

“Nothing, boss.”

“*Nothing?*”

Nothing, FRIDAY confirms. While there’s tons of footage of spider-whoever-he-is, from cell phones and security cameras alike, there is not a single screen in dozens of hours of footage that shows the guy’s face. What’s more, FRIDAY goes on, spider guy never seems to disappear in the same place twice—meaning she has no idea where he lives.

So apparently, the guy is less of an amateur than Tony gave him credit for. Whoops.

No time to reprimand himself though. Tony likes to save self-loathing for *after* the battle, as a sort of palate cleanser, so instead of wallowing he just tells Friday to run a scan of all *current* security footage. If Tony doesn’t know where he’s going, he’ll have to catch him where he is.

Which is how, an hour or so later, Tony finds himself on a rooftop in Queens, shoving the little runt who calls himself *Spider-Man* off the edge of a building.

In retrospect, that first meeting will seem like a fitting metaphor for the next three months of their relationship.

Of course, that’s the problem with retrospect: you only ever see it when it’s too late.

Here’s something else Tony only realizes when it’s too late:

He should never have agreed to let the kid keep the mask on.

First of all, the irony isn’t lost on him, even at the beginning. He’s literally asking the kid—and it’s definitely a kid under there; judging from the voice and the weedy muscle, Tony’s guessing nineteen, twenty years old, tops—to come help him fight a war in which Tony has taken the side of Transparency and Oversight. The fact that said kid’s one condition is “no transparency and no oversight” ought to be a deal breaker.

The problem is, Tony *gets* it.

How many times has he regretted that he had to go off and run his mouth on an internationally-televised press conference literally hours after his first public bad-guy smash-down? More than he'd like to admit. More than he can count, probably, though he does remember a few particularly gut-squeezing instances of that regret: The worst was when he watched Pepper fall into the flames. Second worst was when she walked out the door for the last time. Could he have prevented these things if he'd just kept his mouth shut that first time? There's no way to know, but that doesn't stop Tony from torturing himself with the question late at night, lying in bed alone.

It's too late for Tony to get any do-overs, but it's not too late for the kid. Tony figures he's got people to protect, and that's an instinct he's willing to let the guy ride out, at least for a while—at least until he sees that *Tony* is trustworthy, even if the rest of the world isn't.

So he lets him keep the mask. Hell, he even makes him a new one—one that he can wear without looking like a bad knockoff of a Tim Burton character—and doesn't respond to any of Happy's exasperated texts when the latter goes to pick the kid up for the battle into which Tony has just enlisted him.

The other problem is that Tony is desperate.

It's a desperation that increases when, some twenty-six hours after he promised Ross he would bring Steve and Bucky in, the pair of them blast off into the sunset in a jet Tony designed, leaving Rhodey with a broken back and Tony with a stony resolve that is only matched in weight by the crushing realization that this might be the end of everything. Not just his friendship with Steve—hard enough—but of the Avengers themselves.

It's maybe this weight that drives Tony to the kid's hotel room: on a day when he's just lost half the people he thought were his friends, it might be nice to connect with someone who helped him without question, even though that person *wasn't* his friend. Or maybe it's the fact that he's just spent five hours hunched outside an operating room, watching a team of doctors try and fail to repair his oldest friend's shattered spine, and he knows if he goes to bed with that image in his mind he's never going to get to sleep.

Maybe Tony is just tired of watching things shatter. It's not what he's good at. He's good at building things, like he built the kid's suit—like he's going to build Rhodey new legs—and he needs a reminder of that. The kid seems like a good avenue. He did great today, besides—no harm in letting him know, right? That's teambuilding.

Tony's gotta start somewhere.

But when he shows up, the kid is still in his mask.

It's the first time Tony feels a twinge of annoyance, the first time he starts to really question the terms and conditions of this deal. He wonders, for just the space of a second, if the kid is sort of mocking him by keeping it on—because if knocking out a fifty-foot man together doesn't make you pals, what does?—reminding him that all his well-intentioned promises are bound to come bite him in the ass eventually.

Then Tony sees the way the kid skirts around him when he enters the room, how he takes the chair instead of the bed when Tony tells him to sit, how he hasn't mentioned anything about the dumb t-shirt Tony made Happy buy for him, even though Tony meant it as a sort of punishment for being silly enough to climb on an airplane to another country without even an overnight bag, and he realizes: the kid isn't being flippant.

He's nervous.

Of course he is, because in the last twenty-four hours he's gone from Guy-Who-Knocks-Out-Criminals-in-his-Pajamas to Guy-Who-Fights-Avengers-With-Tony-Stark, which would probably be a little nerve-wracking even if the guy weren't only a few months deep into being a superhero *period*.

So Tony, once again, lets the kid keep the mask.

This is mistake number two.

"Tony. Tony. Earth to Mr. Stark. Hey!"

At last Tony looks up from his phone, where he's been responding to a non-stop stream of messages from Ross and his cronies for the last ten-ish hours. Only then does he realize they are stopped at a light just a few blocks away from the main branch of the New York Public Library, where Happy and Tony dropped Spider-Man off not three minutes ago.

Happy is fully turned around in his seat, staring at Tony with a look they are both entirely too familiar with at this point in their near twenty-year relationship. It says, *Tony Stark, just what in the hell are you playing at?*

Tony raises an eyebrow, then looks back down at his phone.

"Use your words, Hap."

"The kid," says Happy.

"Two words is a good start. Now expand on that. Take it to the next level."

Happy sighs impatiently.

"He doesn't seem, I don't know... a little *young* to you?"

"What are you getting at, Mr. Hogan?"

"You don't even know his name, Tony. You don't know anything about him. He could be two toddlers stacked on top of each other for all you're concerned. Are you sure this is the brightest move?"

Tony pushes his sunglasses down his nose, glances at Happy over the top of them.

"Happy," he says, "look where we are."

Happy glances up the street, past the traffic, at the tall marble columns of the library's entranceway, just beyond which the red dot that is Spider-Man can be seen trudging in the opposite direction, carrying the suitcase Tony just gave him.

"It's a library," says Happy flatly. "He probably asked us to drop him off here so he could renew his copy of *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. I'm serious, Tony, I have a bad—"

“We’re three blocks away from Columbia.”

Happy shuts his mouth.

“He’s a college student, Happy,” says Tony. “How else is he finding time to swing all over kingdom come in the middle of the day?”

Happy still looks skeptical.

“Remember when you were in college?” he says. “Did you ever do an actual tally on the massive amounts of damage you caused when you were that age, or did you just leave that for the future *People* magazine exposés?”

“I *wasn’t* that age when I was in college. I was fifteen, remember? And I had all kinds of complexes to juggle, too. Daddy, mommy, rich-kid, you name it. The kid’s already miles ahead of me.”

“Yeah. Where you had mountains of money, all he has is superpowers. Oh, and now a multi-million-dollar suit to go with them. What could go wrong?”

“You’re missing the light.”

Happy swears as the car behind him leans on its horn. He turns around in his seat and presses on the gas.

“All I’m saying is—”

“Relax.” Tony glances over his shoulder one more time, but the speck of red is gone, lost in the crowd. They turn a corner, and the library disappears too. “I’m gonna keep an eye on him, Hap. He’ll be fine.”

Tony really does mean it. He likes the kid. He likes how he could spend a whole afternoon punching superheroes in the face and still act starstruck when Tony bought him dinner that same evening. He likes the Star Wars references. He likes the fact that the kid offered to help, again, even though he has already done more than most people ever would and all he’s asked in return is his privacy, even though he could have asked for so much more. Could have taken advantage of Tony, his money and his generosity, like ninety-nine percent of the people in Tony’s life do.

Tony really does mean to keep an eye on him.

But then Siberia happens.

And Tony forgets about a lot of things.

For a few months after the fight, Tony’s life has just two notes.

The first:

Bucky Barnes killed my parents.

The second:

Steve knew.

They might not be numerous, but they are large.

They don't leave much room for anything else.

Unfortunately—or fortunately, maybe—Tony's life doesn't leave much room for wallowing. He knows it, but he still needs the reminder.

As usual, the reminder comes in the form of Pepper Potts.

"The Accords are falling apart," she says, appearing without preamble in his Upper East Side apartment one Monday morning, dressed for work and acting for all the world like the last five months haven't happened—like the last ten *years* haven't happened, and she is still his assistant, and it is still her job to show up early and pull Tony out of whatever funk he's gotten himself into over the weekend, be it woman-related or alcohol-related or otherwise. "They're calling your friends the Rogue Avengers, the UN is in its sixth straight week of full-on crisis mode, and every single day I'm fielding calls asking *Where's Tony Stark?* That's not my job anymore, Tony."

Tony, who is laying on the couch in the pajamas he's worn all week, doesn't look up from his wrist gauntlet, which he's been tinkering with ever since the incident with Bucky.

"They're not my friends," he says.

"And I'm not your girlfriend," says Pepper bluntly. "But look—the world hasn't ended."

To illustrate her point, she has FRIDAY raise the blinds, forcing Tony to drop his screwdriver so he can lift his unencumbered hand to shield his eyes against offensive light. Finally, he sits up.

"What do you want from me, Pepper?" he snaps. "Why are you here?"

"I'm here because this isn't you," she says. "And whenever you're not you, you need someone to remind you of how to *be* you. You need a project, Tony. I don't care if it's the Accords, or fixing the Avengers, or the September Fund—"

"Or us?"

Pepper heaves a deep breath through her nose.

"No," she says. "Not that. But how about this?"

She flicks her wrist at the nearest screen and an article from the *Daily Bugle* flashes up on it. There's a picture of Spider-Man accompanying this article: it's blurry and grainy, taken by a cell phone from a distance, but there's no mistaking that red-and-blue suit, because Tony designed it himself.

NEW FIASCO FOR TONY STARK? Known Stark accomplice SPIDER-MAN has been AIDING CRIMINALS—and The Bugle has the proof!

"Oof," says Tony.

“Oof is right,” says Pepper. “Might be worth looking into.” She checks her watch. “I have a meeting. Are you going to survive?”

Tony, head spinning as the tiniest bit of his two-month stupor starts to lift, nods vaguely, still staring at the screen.

Pepper does something unexpected then: she crosses the trash-strewn living room and, briefly, kisses Tony on the top of his head.

Then she is gone.

Tony gets to his feet.

Time to get back to work.

It turns out Happy has been keeping an eye on the kid in Tony’s absence. Or—sort of. He’s been fielding the kid’s calls, anyway, listening to his messages to make sure he hasn’t gotten himself into any real trouble, saving the data in case Tony ever decided to make good on his promise to call Spider-Man in.

“Oh, thank God,” he says, when Tony finally asks him to send them over. “He is all yours, boss.”

As soon as Tony sees how many messages there are, he understands Happy’s relief. The kid has been... enthusiastic in Tony’s absence. And that’s putting it mildly.

But, even as he rolls his eyes at the poorly-punctuated text messages and rambling voicemails, Tony doesn’t share in Happy’s exasperation. It’s actually kind of endearing, how eager the kid is—Tony can’t remember the last time he had the kind of youthful enthusiasm for doing good that the kid does, but he *likes* it. It makes some of the fog of the last few months lift. Just a little bit, but enough that Tony feels like he can get off the couch again.

He listens to the kid’s messages in the workshop, while he works on new legs for Rhodey. He listens in the car, on his way to the UN to discuss amendments to the Accords. He listens in the background while he has Ross on mute in the foreground, and, somehow, it makes each of these things bearable. It’s like the world’s most exclusive, most endearing superhero podcast: “What Trouble Did Spider-Man Get Into This Week?” What animals did he rescue, what school kids did he perform stunts for, what purses did he save from the clutches of New York’s most nefarious petty thieves? It’s such a staunch reminder that there is a world beyond this massive, untenable, high-stakes one Tony has built for himself that he almost finds himself looking forward to when Happy will send him the next round: because isn’t this what he’s been fighting for all along? The little guys. The people just trying to live their lives without having to worry a superhero is gonna drop a building on their heads at any moment. The ones, apparently, that Spider-Man is out there saving.

And yet, in spite of all this, Tony doesn’t call him.

He tells himself it’s because he hasn’t needed the kid’s help yet. What’s the point pulling him out of a good thing—being a friendly, neighborhood Spider-Man—if he doesn’t even have anything important to replace it with? But really Tony knows it’s because of him. It’s because he wants to preserve the kid’s goofy goodness as long as he can before he has to corrupt it—yeah, for the kid’s

sake, but also for his own, because currently that goofy goodness is one of the only things that gets him through the worst days.

The Accords *are* falling apart. Public opinion is shifting as more details of the HYDRA/SHIELD incident leak, as the extent of the brainwashing and manipulation Barnes endured is slowly made public. What was supposed to be a method of mitigating an imbalance of power is starting to look like just another power-grab by the United States government, and even though Tony tends to agree—even though he has, in fact, said as much, right in front of two dozen cameras at the UN—he is still the Avenger who started it all. He backed the Accords, and now the world is looking at him to fix them.

Part of fixing them is going to mean fixing this thing with Spider-Man.

In spite of the fact that it's all bullshit—which Tony knows first-hand, because he's the one listening to the kid's "daily reports," and knows now that the kid could no more be part of a crime syndicate than he could be two toddlers in disguise—the rumors about Spider-Man are starting to take hold in certain circles. Circles outside of the noxious *Daily Bugle* and its staff. Ross himself calls Tony one afternoon with a stern warning to "get a hold of his man," and get him listed on the Accords.

But to get Spider-Man listed would mean unmasking him, and learning his name.

And to do that, Tony would have to break his promise. Break Spider-Man's trust.

He has a whole thing about breaking other people's trust these days.

So he puts it off.

And he puts it off.

And then Spider-Man blows up a bank, and he can't put it off any longer.

Tony is in Malibu hosting a September Grant fundraiser when FRIDAY sends the notification that the kid's heart rate has just gone bonkers. Because of course he is. The whole time he's been keeping up with the kid's daily activities he's been thinking he'll wait for the moment he actually needs the kid—he didn't even stop to think what would happen if the kid needed *him*. He curses himself as he makes a hasty exit from the party and down into his lab, suit already on its way to Spider-Man's location, already imagining the possible messes the kid could have gotten himself into while Tony was busy feeling sad for himself.

What Tony doesn't expect is to find the kid crouched on the fire escape of an apartment building in Midtown, peering into a darkened window and speaking to what appears to be a *very young* girl.

It's so unexpected, in fact, that Tony doesn't reveal himself right away, despite the worry of a moment ago. He opts to just listen instead.

The longer he listens, the more worried he becomes.

It's not that the admittedly-potentially-creepy scene unfolding before him is *actually* creepy. Again, Tony feels like the kid is about as likely to be two toddlers in a supersuit as he is to be the

kind of person who preys on little girls—a fact that seems affirmed by said little girl’s easy, affectionate reaction to him. It’s that Spider-Man has clearly been here before—probably often—and has never mentioned it in his messages. Not once. And considering the fact that Tony *just* listened to a message where the kid went on about some lady with a churro, this is cause for some alarm.

What’s Spider-Man got to hide? Besides his face, that is. And his identity. And where he lives. And who his friends are.

And suddenly, Tony feels like just as big an idiot as he did two months ago, staring down at the burner phone he just pulled out of the FedEx package and thinking, *Is this what all those years come down to?* He trusted Steve because Steve was... *Steve*. All-American, muscley, wholesome, heroic. How could anyone *not* trust that?

And look where it got him.

Is he already making the same mistake with Spider-Man? Is he really going to trust him just because of some endearing voicemails and a goofy facade?

It’s with this thought resting sour in his mouth that Tony makes his presence known on the rooftop. Which is maybe why he’s a little indecorous with his greeting.

“Hey, Spider-Man,” Tony says. “Who’s Peter?”

For the second time, Tony nearly knocks Spider-Man off a roof.

It’s only satisfying for a second.

The kid, despite his calm voice and demeanor when he spoke to the little girl down below, doesn’t look so great—and that’s with the mask still covering his face. His heart is still pounding, his shoulders are tense—and when he sees who he’s talking to, he doesn’t give Tony anything like the warm welcome he was expecting after all those messages.

It’s off-putting. But mostly concerning. What else has Tony missed while he’s been sitting in his ivory tower, treating the kid like prime-time entertainment instead of what he actually is: a barely-adult superhero who’s so green at this schtick he’s like a Boy Scout without any badges?

Spider-Man tells Tony he caught him on a bad night.

And Tony does something that surprises even him.

“I get those sometimes,” he says. “Wanna talk about it?”

What did he tell Spider-Man about the touchy-feely stuff? No can do. Not from Tony Stark, and *especially* not since his girlfriend dumped him, his team betrayed him, and the entire country slowly turned its collective back on him. And yet there it is: the offer of comfort.

What’s more, Tony doesn’t regret it. He *wants* to help Spider-Man.

Teambuilding, right? A chance to undo some of the bad that’s been done, in the name of something bigger.

But Spider-Man shakes his head.

Hope flip-flops, becomes annoyance. It’s been doing that a lot lately.

So once again Tony asks the kid the one question he clearly doesn't want Tony to ask.

"Who's Peter?"

Peter, apparently, is complicated. He's just some guy Spider-Man knows, who seems really mature but might not be because Spider-Man doesn't know his age. Spider-Man assures Tony everything is fine, that the girls are fine and nothing bad is happening, but that doesn't exactly explain what he's doing on their fire escape. It doesn't explain, either, why he would come here moments after blowing up a bank.

The longer he talks, the more annoyance gives way to worry.

He doesn't seem a little young to you?

Happy's words come screaming back, because Spider-Man does, in fact, seem a little young to him. Younger and younger the longer they talk.

And the younger he gets in Tony's approximation, the stronger the urge to just—look under the mask.

But Tony made a promise. He meant it. And if promises don't mean anything anymore—if they can all just say one thing and do another—what's he been fighting for?

The kid is saying something about alien weapons. It registers only laterally—Tony's known about the illegal deals going down in and around the city for a few months now, but it's low-level stuff, and he's letting the FBI handle it—because Tony is thinking about that mask. The mask he made. The mask he maybe never should have given the kid.

He tells the kid to be careful, and he disconnects the suit.

From the sound of things, the party is still going strong upstairs. But Tony makes no attempt to get out of his seat. He leans back, staring at the now-blank screen and drumming his fingers on the desk, trying to will the uncomfortable suspicion that is growing in his mind back into the depths of it.

It doesn't work.

"FRIDAY," Tony says, "get me everything you've got on the address we were just at. I wanna know who this Peter is."

He *did* tell Spider-Man he would look into it, after all. So why does this feel uncomfortably like a betrayal?

It's too late to back out now, though. FRIDAY, efficient as ever, has already pulled up the records for the apartment. It is owned by one Melissa Westcott, but she doesn't reside there—the tenant is her ex-husband, Steven. Steven is a former-investment-banker-turned-altruist: when Tony searches his name he finds more than a dozen articles on Steven's work with teenage boys, his donations to various foster programs, the awards he's won for his charities.

Not exactly the monster Tony was afraid he might find.

There's nothing about any Peter in the articles, but that's not exactly surprising: if he's one of Westcott's foster kids, that would mean he's a minor—or at least was one, when he stayed there—and it's not like they're going to throw his personal information around.

The uncomfortable suspicion expands. Becomes uncomfortable enough that Tony does something he knows he shouldn't do, because if it ever gets out that he did it it's going to be almost as hard to explain as... well, as everything else that's been going on in Tony's life lately.

He hacks into Steven Westcott's records with CPS.

The guilt over this transgression lasts just a second. As soon as he's in, he finds what he's looking for: a name at the bottom of a list of kids Westcott has fostered in the past.

Peter Parker, 14.

"Please don't be who I think you are," Tony mutters, and he clicks on the file.

But it does not affirm his suspicions. Nor, on the other hand, does it contradict them.

The file is almost empty. It contains just two items: a picture of Peter Parker and an interview with Steven Westcott, stating that the boy had gone missing in the night. The interview is less than a page long; the picture is dated almost two years ago. The kid in it is surly-looking, distrustful: he's eyeing the camera like it's a snake, wearing lopsided glasses and a filthy t-shirt and looking like he might have just stepped out of a low-budget production of *Les Misérables*. He certainly doesn't look like someone who spends his afternoons giving old ladies directions to the J Train, but Tony has never been one to let something go based on what equates to nothing more than a hopeful hunch.

"Where's the rest of it?"

He's more wondering out loud than asking, but FRIDAY replies anyway.

"The NYC CPS office keeps a lot of their records on paper, boss. Underfunded, I think."

Tony raps his fingers across the desktop again, staring at Peter Parker.

He doesn't want to do it. He might have told the kid he was going to look into Peter, but he also specifically told him he *wouldn't* activate the tracker unless there was an emergency. Tony isn't sure "*I'm super uncomfortable with the possible implications of a promise I made when I was desperate*" counts as an emergency, but...

He pulls up Spider-Man's location.

And breathes a sigh of relief. The suit isn't on Columbia's campus, like he was hoping, but it's not in some gutter or alleyway, like he was fearing. It's in an apartment building in lower Queens. A nice, middle-class apartment building. And if Spider-Man *is* a college student, he might have just gone home for the weekend. It is Friday, after all.

It calms Tony's nerves a bit. But not enough. He jumps when, upstairs, someone drops a glass, and a roar of laughter follows.

But the smack of nerves is followed by something better: inspiration.

"Hey FRI?"

"Yeah, boss?"

"What's the September Fund budget for charitable causes?"

"Nothing. All the funds are reserved for scientific pursuits. But since you're the one who set it up that way, I'm guessing you already knew that."

“Alright, sassafras, cool it. I’m just thinking out loud.” He closes the file. “What do you say we move a few things around? And get in touch with CPS, please. I’d like to make an appointment.”

It’s been a long time since Tony has been in a stranger’s living room. It’s one of those little quirks about being famous that he never thinks about until it comes up—like how he can’t go to the movies without renting the whole theater—but it hits him now, as he perches on the edge of a well-worn leather armchair and tries not to think about how hard the social worker sitting on the couch across from him is trying to make it look like she isn’t staring. He almost never ends up in other people’s apartments.

It makes the experience of *this* apartment ever-so-faintly surreal.

So does the fact that he’s been here before. Just not inside of it.

This surreality increases when Steven Westcott returns to the living room and hands Tony a steaming mug. He’s *really* not used to being served tea by muscular, middle-aged men. Beaten up by them, sure. But this is a different level of weird.

Westcott, on the other hand, looks perfectly at ease as he hands a second cup of tea to the social worker—who both looks like and is a Linda—and sits beside her on the couch.

“I have to say, Mr. Stark,” says Westcott, “we were thrilled to hear you were interested in my work. But I have to ask, why now?”

Tony straightens up, forces himself into the moment. He’s been staring at the pictures on the mantelpiece, each of which depicts Westcott with his arm around a different boy in a cap and gown—high school graduations. Peter is not among them.

Tony pastes on his best winning smile.

“Is there ever a bad time for charity?”

Westcott chuckles. “Well, no. Obviously not. Not in my opinion. But—I suppose I just wasn’t aware you were interested in foster care. Especially not the kind I specialize in.”

Tony sets his tea aside.

“Sure,” he says. “Billionaire shows up on your doorstep, you’re naturally gonna have a few questions. But to be honest, Mr. Westcott—”

“Please, call me Skip.”

Tony struggles to maintain his smile. What a stupid nickname.

“Skip,” he says. “Anyway. To be honest, Skip, I’m kind of in the market for all sorts of charitable causes at the moment. You’ve been following the, ah—”

“Accords debacle?”

“Debacle is one word for it. I like ‘fiasco,’ personally, but the *Post* went for ‘shitshow,’ which, I admit, has a certain colloquial flare.”

Westcott smiles tightly. "So it's a PR move."

Linda makes a sound like a hiccup.

"I'm sure what Steven means is—"

"It's a personal move," says Tony. "The point of the Accords was to make the world a better place. Now that it's proven to be a *bad* move, I'm looking for new ones. The September Fund has mostly focused on research and development, but I want to expand. I saw an article about your work putting teens through college. Seemed like a good place to start."

Linda relaxes.

"I assure you, Mr. Stark, it is a good move. Steven is one of our most dedicated foster parents, a true stand-out. His work has already changed so many lives, but with funding we could do so much more."

"Of course. You've put how many kids through school, now?"

"Six," says Westcott. "And I have a seventh slated to join us here on Friday. My girls are already losing their minds with excitement."

Tony saw the twin girls when he came in, but only for a second: their babysitter ushered them into their room before he could even say hello. They seemed happy enough though. Clean. Smiling. Not terrified of their dad.

Not for the first time since he arrived, Tony wishes he knew more about kids. But he can hear them laughing down the hall, so that must be a good sign. Right?

He swings his attention back to the living room.

"Sorry," he says. "I thought it was eight."

"Pardon?"

"The kids you fostered. Won't the new one be your eighth?"

Linda's smile disappears. Westcott, on the other hand, dons a look of understanding almost immediately.

"I see," he says. "You're here about Peter."

Tony holds his hands out in a "you got me" gesture.

"Have I already mentioned that the Accords have put me in some hot water?" he says. "I can't afford another shitshow. So you understand why I've gotta cover all my bases here, *Skip*."

He can't help the emphasis on the nickname, but if Westcott catches the sarcasm, he doesn't mention it. Just continues to smile tightly at Tony and opens his mouth to respond.

Linda cuts across him.

"Mr. Stark," she says, her voice slightly higher-pitched now. "Peter was—not that I ever like to speak ill of our children—but Peter was an absolute anomaly, and I can assure you what happened with him had nothing to do with Steven. I worked with him from the moment his case came through my office the night his uncle died, and he was a problem from day one. He had a

propensity for running away. In fact the reason his uncle was out the night he died was—”

“His uncle died?” Tony interrupts.

“Shot,” says Linda. “A mugging. And as I was saying, he was out that night because Peter ran away. He was looking for him. So you see there was a history—”

“You think it was the Parker kid’s fault his uncle died?”

“Of course not!” Tony can practically see Linda’s tongue ravelling back into her mouth as she tries to backtrack. “It was a freak incident—I wasn’t—I’m only trying to say he had a record of that behavior. It was one of the reasons we couldn’t place him. You should have seen how upset his cousins were when they had to give him back, but he was out of control, leaving the house at all hours, never communicating his whereabouts—”

“I think what Linda is trying to say,” says Westcott, placing a hand on Linda’s knee, “is that my boys come to me specifically because they’ve had trouble finding placement in other homes. It’s the reason I do what I do, but it means the work isn’t always easy, and Peter was...” He sighs. His lower lip trembles. He shakes his head until it disappears, but not before Tony catches it and is struck with the urge to look away, as though he’s staring at something intensely private. “Sorry.” Westcott pinches the bridge of his nose. “I still have a hard time talking about it. Peter was a particularly difficult case. He was a smart kid. A lot of potential. But I think sometimes in these situations the more advantages a young man has, the harder it is for him to adjust to what he sees as unfair circumstances. Peter felt... betrayed, I think. By the world, maybe. Like he should have had better, and couldn’t understand why life had taken such vicious turns. I really did think I could get through to him—and the girls loved him—but to be honest, Mr. Stark, I wasn’t surprised when he ran away. Heartbroken, but not surprised.”

The tight knot that has been sitting high in Tony’s chest ever since the incident on the rooftop a few nights ago is beginning to ease. Westcott seems genuinely cut up about the Parker kid—and the proof is sort of in the pudding, as far as the other kids are concerned. The girls look happy. The boys on the mantelpiece all went to college. And Tony’s read Westcott’s backstory—how he got out of the finance game when his only son died in order to become a full-time altruist. The whole thing is like a feel-good Lifetime movie. Nobody here appears to need saving.

On top of that, Tony has been checking Spider-Man’s location periodically since this weekend. He’s been on Columbia’s campus the entire time.

It really does seem to be a misunderstanding—thank God—but Tony isn’t quite satisfied. Because whatever Spider-Man *thinks* is going on in this house clearly doesn’t match up with the reality. Tony wants to understand the disconnect.

So he says, “Are you doing anything to find him?”

Linda and Westcott glance at each other.

“That’s on us,” she says. “Whenever a kid runs away we always put in our due diligence, work with the police, do whatever we can. But to be honest... our funds are abysmal, Mr. Stark. I hate to say it, but when it comes down to it, if we have to decide between finding a child who didn’t want their foster home and helping a child who does, we have to go for the willing one every time.”

For this, Linda does sound genuinely regretful. Tony’s annoyance toward her softens, too. Though she’s put on her best suit and made an attempt at styling her hair, she is clearly not a wealthy woman—far from it. The pantsuit is threadbare and stained. There is a tremor in her left hand she’s

been trying to hide by clenching it in her lap the entire time. When she came in, she walked with a limp.

She desperately wants the money Tony is offering. And he's not a monster—he's going to give it to her. But first—

"Is there any way I could see Peter's file?"

Linda grimaces. "That's not really—"

"I understand. I know it's not a great look, giving the confidential file to the rich guy just because he asks for it. But you gotta understand, I'm just trying to help. As someone who throws a lot of money at a lot of causes, I can tell you first hand it's better to get out in front of any potential problems than to deal with the fallout afterward."

Linda purses her lips. She sighs, and reaches for her handbag.

"I think Margaret has Peter's file. She might be in the neighborhood, I'll give her a call."

She gets to her feet, cell phone in hand, and limps into the hallway.

This leaves just Tony and Westcott, sitting across from each other in a silence that immediately becomes awkward. Westcott is still dabbing at his eyes like he is pressing back tears.

Tony is saved from having to fill this awkward silence when the twin girls come barreling into the living room. One of them is crying.

"Daddy," she sobs, climbing immediately into Westcott's lap, "I got a papercut and Emma said I was being a baby. But *look*, it's bleeding!"

"I didn't say she was a baby," says the second twin. "I just said it wasn't that bad."

The first girl dissolves into sobs.

Westcott shoots Tony a look of apology. "I'll be right back," he says, and, scooping the crying girl up in his arms, he disappears down the hallway.

Tony would say it's a relief, except he's suddenly alone in the living room with an eight-year-old girl who is staring at him with an intensity that suggests she's trying to x-ray him.

"You're a very unnerving little gremlin," says Tony. "Has anyone ever told you that?"

The girl—Emma—blinks.

"You're Iron Man," she says.

"So I'm told."

"That means you're a superhero."

"Right on the nose."

"Do you know Spider-Man?"

Oh. *Oh*.

Where does "using a little girl to get information on your superhero buddies while her dad's back is turned" rank on Tony's current moral hierarchy?

He decides it's not the worst thing he could do.

Tony glances down the hallway. He can hear the water running in the bathroom. So he leans forward, toward Emma, and lowers his voice.

"That's right," he says. "I'm a friend of his. He told me you're really good at keeping secrets, is that true?"

Emma shrugs one shoulder.

"Spider-Man said you might have some secrets about your brother, Peter. He said you might be able to help me learn a little bit more about him."

Emma continues to stare at him, face still unnervingly discerning. At last, she says, "Spider-Man says I should only talk to superheroes."

"You're in luck, kiddo. That's me."

Emma takes a breath. Holds it for a minute. Then whispers, "I don't think Peter liked Daddy very much."

Tony opens his mouth to ask what she means by that, but before he can get the words out Linda comes bursting back in, puffing like she's just run a mile, carrying a thick manilla file folder.

"You're in luck, Mr. Stark," she says, "Margaret was right around the corner. She had the file in her car."

Clapping, Tony leaps to his feet, trying to cover up the fact that he was just having a very covert conversation with a very little girl—not unlike Spider-Man himself did a few days ago.

"Great," he says, "well, I won't take any more of your time. I'll just borrow this, if that's okay. I'll get it back to you, you know, on the double. Just—ah, Mr. Westcott. Skip." Westcott has just appeared in the living room, the first twin on his hip. "There you are. I'm on my way out. Just, er, get me your proposal when you can and we'll go from there. It's been a pleasure. Linda." He shakes Linda's hand as he takes the file from her. "Unnerving girl." He nods at Emma. "And let's not forget *Skip*."

For some reason, when he grips Westcott's hand, the tiniest of tremors runs up Tony's forearm and down his spine.

But it's gone before he can think about it.

Prize in hand, eager to be away from the possibility of any further scrutiny, Tony hightails it into the elevator, down to the lobby, and out to his car, which is waiting on the curb. Only once he's inside does he open the file, flipping past the photo—the same one that's online—and to the meat of the thing. The real story.

And Tony deflates. All of the tension he's been carrying since Friday rushes out of him, until he's almost aching with relief:

There is *no way* this kid is Spider-Man.

There's no way for the same reason there's no way Spider-Man is part of crime syndicate. For the same reason *The Bugle* is full of shit. For the same reason Tony even went through this dog-and-pony show at all: Spider-Man is too goddamn *nice*.

If this file is any indication, Peter Parker doesn't have the same problem.

The file is a godsend—Tony really doesn't think he can handle another terrible twist of fate where his allies are concerned—but it does not, unfortunately, answer one of the more pressing questions of the day: If this is who Peter Parker really is, then what has he told Spider-Man? More importantly, what does Spider-Man think he's doing for the guy?

The hands-off approach is no longer working.

It never really has, where Tony is concerned. He needs to get elbow-deep in a problem before he can solve it, and he's dallied enough where Spider-Man is involved. It's time to take a firmer stance as the kid's recruiter, suit-supplier and—though the thought is a little bit terrifying—maybe even as his mentor.

Tony tosses the file onto his front seat, and he drives away from Skip Westcott's apartment.

He doesn't look any further. He doesn't go to the halfway house, or visit the cousins, or even Peter's school. It's all in the file—Tony figures he has all the evidence he needs to start nudging the kid in a more sensible, well-thought-out direction as far as his pet projects—like Peter Parker—are concerned.

This is mistake number three.

What Heroes Do

Tony will be the first to admit that he's not exactly elegant about it the first time he brings Peter Parker up to Spider-Man. In his defense, though, he has just found his very-expensive tracking equipment stuck to a lamp post.

With gum.

He's not being flippant, therefore, when he tells Spider-Man the trust issues are messing with his self-esteem. Okay, he totally is, but he's not *just* being flippant. He really did put that tracker in there to keep the kid safe—any variances from that intended use have been totally incidental. And didn't Tony just spend the better part of a week trying to make sure Spider-Man wasn't getting roped into some nefarious plot by a seedy runaway teen? Didn't he drink another man's tea?

It's with this in mind that Tony presents his argument:

Stay away from the Parker kid.

It might make sense that the kid doesn't exactly take it in stride.

"I told you that was my business, man." Spider-Man's voice sounds nothing like it does on his voicemails. Tonight it is hoarse, rough and exhausted. Tony would think the kid has been going too hard again, but up until he got the notification that the chute had been deployed an hour and a half ago, Tony had thought Spider-Man was taking his advice—laying low. He hasn't been spotted on the street in almost a week. He hasn't been going too hard. He's just pissed. "I told you I was handling it, and you told me—you *promised*—!"

At the mention of broken promises, Tony's already-overtaxed heart starts to pound a little harder.

So he escalates.

So does Spider-Man.

The night ends with a shouting match on a rooftop. Spider-Man is angry because Tony looked into the Parker kid. Tony is angry because *wasn't that what he was supposed to do?* Three months of total absenteeism, and he's getting chewed out because he actually tried for once? And on top of that, far from removing the mask—or even indicating that he might consider it—Spider-Man has doubled down on his resolve to keep it.

He's refused Tony's help at every turn. He continues to refuse it even now—when Tony is offering *real* help, not just a high-tech suit and a pat on the back.

It stings more than Tony likes to admit.

Apparently, though, Spider-Man doesn't think distrust is a two-way street. For how careful he's been with his identity, he's been pretty wantonly carefree about using Tony's tech however he wants. Removing the tracker, hacking the Training Wheels Protocol... Tony knows, deep down, that he's being a little dramatic by thinking it, but it feels just a tinge too close to what his other so-called teammates have done in the past: taken what Tony has made for him and used it against him.

So Tony loses it. Just a little.

“You want to do everything on your own?” he snaps. “Great. You’re not the first superhero to feel that way. But don’t say I didn’t warn you. About all of it.”

Using the suit to make dramatic exits from uncomfortable conversations might be the least mature way Tony ever uses it.

It’s still one of his favorites, though.

He stewes about the argument for three days. Throws the discarded tracker in the garbage. Ignores any news alerts about Spider-Man. Holes himself up and pours all of his energy into prepping for the final move from Avengers Tower in the city to the facility upstate, whose lab Tony makes his home for the time being. By day four, though, the anger starts to wane: was he being too harsh on the kid again? He tells himself he was going for a sort of tough love thing, then flinches inwardly: that’s the exact kind of thing his father would have said.

Yikes.

As soon as he thinks it, Tony asks FRIDAY for any news updates he’s missed. It’s the usual waffle from the rags, but nothing concrete, no new reports of crime-fighting activity. It looks like Spider-Man is still laying low. Following Tony’s advice—or avoiding him?

Tony had Happy start forwarding the kid’s messages directly around the time of the bank explosion. But Tony hasn’t gotten anything there in a few days either. Coming up on a couple of weeks, actually.

Tony stares at his phone for a long time, finger hovering over the call button.

Except... except Spider-Man *is* being reckless. Well-intentioned or not, his actions are becoming increasingly erratic, and it’s gotten to the point where the news stories aren’t just harmless gossip. Tony saw an Op-Ed in the *Times* last week wondering why the government wasn’t doing more to monitor possible unsanctioned genetic experiments, and even though Spider-Man wasn’t mentioned outright, the author wasn’t exactly subtle in who they were referencing. It’s only a matter of time before the opinion of the public—the part of the public that actually matters, anyway—starts to tilt in an unfavorable direction. Tony wants to get out ahead of it. He knows better than anyone else in the world what it means to have the press turn against you. He doesn’t want to subject the kid to that.

Talking clearly isn’t working. Both times Tony has tried to coax Spider-Man into more reasonable stances vis-a-vis aiding and abetting criminal activity, he’s been met with accusations of distrust and betrayal.

What’s he supposed to do in this situation? If it was any other teammate, Tony would probably either try to get the inevitable fist fight out of the way—nothing like punching it out to solve a disagreement between a few superhero buddies, right?—or just annoy them until they gave in.

He has a feeling neither of these will work with Spider-Man. First of all, he’s seen the kid take an SUV to the face without flinching. Second of all, he doesn’t really *want* to punch the little doofus’ lights out. Coming down on a friend just because they disagreed with him? How very Steve.

As for annoying him—that only works with the others because they know him. Spider-Man still

thinks of Tony as someone to look up to. He'd probably just put up with it.

While Tony is staring at his phone and trying to come up with a plan C, his text message alert chimes. Unknown number.

It's not Spider-Man. Tony's heart sinks just one or two degrees, especially when he sees who it is from.

Unknown: *Hello Mr. Stark, this is Linda from Child Protective Services. One of our advocates is asking for Peter's file back. Are you able to meet her sometime in the next few days?*

Now Tony is annoyed. He doesn't want to go back to the city without a plan in mind for the spider kid, but he supposes it's his own damn fault. He shouldn't have taken the file in the first place, but he just didn't want to read it in front of the staring twin or risk 'Skip' getting all teary-eyed again.

He replies with a time. Linda gives him a place.

In the end, Tony is glad he agrees to meet Margaret Esposito, though he won't realize the extent of that gratitude for some time.

His annoyance that he has to meet her in the city gives way to curiosity the moment he arrives at their decided-upon meeting place: It's right outside the bodega Spider-Man himself blew up just a couple of weeks ago. Which just... cannot be a coincidence.

Before he can look into it—or even get out of his car—there is a tap on his window.

Tony rolls it down, and a woman he hasn't met before leans into view. She's younger than Linda, but probably only by a little bit, and Tony knows she works for CPS even before she holds up her badge because she looks just as exhausted as her counterpart. Unlike Linda, though, she hasn't put in any extra effort into her appearance in anticipation of meeting Tony. Her mousy brown hair is piled in a greasy bun on her head. There is a mustard stain on the lapel of her white blouse.

If any of this embarrasses Margaret as she peers through the window of Tony's sports car, she doesn't show it.

"You have my file?" she says.

Tony, who is used to warmer greetings, is momentarily put off.

"You found me fast," he says, reaching for the folder.

"I knocked on all the McLarens in the neighborhood," says Margaret, "this time I got lucky."

Fair enough.

Tony hands her the file.

"I'm Tony, by the way," he says, only a little sarcastically. He *did* just drive all the way down here for this. "Really nice to meet you."

Margaret doesn't reply. She's rifling through Peter's file like she suspects he might have stolen

something. She does not take Tony's hand, either, when he sticks it through the window. He withdraws.

"We good?" says Margaret, when she is seemingly satisfied with the state of the file.

She looks up with an impatient expression. Tony notices she's carrying a messenger bag stuffed with papers.

Because he's curious, but mostly just because of who he is as a person, Tony decides to press a little.

"You know how this bodega got blown up?" he says, nodding at the wreckage.

Margaret shrugs. "Spider-Man. Why do you think I'm here?"

That's... unexpected. And a little alarming.

"You're here looking for Spider-Man?"

"I'm here looking for Peter Parker." In the process of stuffing the file back in her bag, Margaret pulls one of the pieces of paper out. It's a missing poster, complete with Peter Parker's face. She shoves it through the window before Tony can refuse it. "Linda might have been star-struck by you the other day, Mr. Stark, but for some crazy reason I thought it was a little weird that the world's most famous billionaire would show up at Peter's apartment without any warning. So, unlike Linda, I actually thought about it for two seconds."

"Yikes. Someone isn't a fan of old Linda. What does that—"

"Westcott and my colleague might have bought the September Fund line, but I kinda figured for an ulterior motive." Margaret's tone is snappish; Tony has the sense she is only explaining this so she can get rid of him. "You only have one known ally in the city right now. I took a wild leap."

Tony can't help it: he raises his eyebrows, impressed. Almost as impressed as he is with the fact that she is not only *not* impressed with *him* but, if her expression is any indication, downright dislikes him.

"Did I do something to you, Marge? Did I run over your cat on the way over here? Because I'm getting the sense you're not a fan."

"I'm not. Thanks for asking."

She starts to walk away, but no way is Tony letting it lie there. He gets out of the car and chases her across the street, catches up to her just in front of the bodega.

"Woah, woah, hey. You caught me. I wasn't just there because of the September Fund, but it's not like I'm gonna just say 'Sorry kids, no college for you,' because I got what I needed. The grant's real—it was just the motive that was sketchy."

Margaret whirls around. "And what *was* the motive, Mr. Stark? What does Spider-Man have to do with Peter Parker?"

Tony backs up a step. "I don't know that that's relevant, Marge."

"*Margaret.*"

"Margaret," Tony concedes. "And sorry, Margaret, but I'm not sure that's any of your business."

Why are *you* here, anyway? I thought Linda was Peter's social worker."

"She is. I'm his child advocate."

"How's that worked out so far?"

All at once, Margaret's eyes fill with tears. Instant. Unexpected. Just like the guilt that fills Tony's stomach when he sees them.

She starts to walk off again. Tony grabs her.

"Sorry," he says. "Sorry, that was way out of line, I just—" He sighs, frustrated. "Look. I'm sorry. I'm just worried about my friend. That's why I went to see Westcott. I'm trying to figure out what he's tangled up in. That's all. I didn't mean to interfere with your job or—or—"

"Does your friend know where Peter is?"

Her voice is still hard, edged with dislike, but there is something new in it, too. Something Tony knows all too well: desperation.

So he opts for the truth.

"I don't know."

Margaret's shoulders slump. She shakes her head. "Then thanks for your time, I guess. I have to go."

"Wait. Just—one second. Wait. I thought no one was looking for the Parker kid."

Margaret shrugs. "We weren't. Not officially. But when Tony Stark shows up asking questions, funds tend to appear." She shakes her shoulder bag. "These posters are the first thing I've had permission to do in months."

"You seem pretty frustrated for someone who's been searching for—what? Less than a week?"

Margaret purses her lips. "I've had his file for almost six months."

"Have you seen what's in it?"

"What's your point, Mr. Stark?"

"I guess... kid like that doesn't really seem like he wants to be found. How well did you know him, anyway?"

Margaret's lips go thinner, until Tony almost can't see them anymore. "I never got to meet with him. They gave me his case just a few weeks before he went missing."

"So you don't know him at all."

Tony doesn't bother to conceal his disappointment. Talking it out might not have worked with Spider-Man, but that doesn't mean he isn't curious to find out more about Peter. If he can pinpoint their relationship, maybe he can solve it.

Margaret doesn't reply for a moment. She's watching Tony's face.

"You know," she says, "you had a key word in there, when you were talking about Peter. It's the

one everyone seems to miss.”

“What’s that?”

“*Kid*,” says Margaret. She hitches up her bag. “I have work to do, Mr. Stark. Thanks for the file.”

She turns away once more. This time, Tony doesn’t try to stop her.

Back in his car, Tony finally makes that phone call. Spider-Man doesn’t pick up.

Tony leaves a message.

“Hey, kid. It’s Tony. Look, I have a whole thing about, you know, mentorship and father figures, and my massive guilt complex is making me think I might have been a little harsh on the rooftop the other day. Let’s chat when you have a chance.”

Tony pulls away from the bodega, thinking he might stay in town until Spider-Man calls him back.

But it turns out he doesn’t have to wait that long.

Fifteen minutes later he is suited up and flying toward Staten Island to save a hundred people on a boat Spider-Man just blew up.

An hour after that, he sees Spider-Man face-to-face.

And everything goes to hell from there.

He almost thinks the kid won’t give the suit back. There is a part of him—small but vicious—that almost hopes he won’t.

But it’s there when Tony arrives, folded neatly behind a dumpster in the alley behind the sandwich shop where he and Spider-Man first talked. There is even a note pinned to it. The note says, *Sorry*.

Rather than assuaging Tony’s anger, the sight of the note sets Tony off further. *Sorry*? It never means what people think it means. Is it supposed to make him feel better? Because it doesn’t, and it never has. Sorry is just a safety net, to be pulled out whenever someone wants to take a leap they know will only end up hurting someone. Hurting Tony.

He did all he could. He met the kid halfway. Hell, he practically met him in the endzone and *this* is how he’s repaid? Ignored, insulted, betrayed, not to mention *embarrassed* —because when the shit comes down the line for the ferry incident, who are they really going to blame? Spider-Man, or the guy who threw him into this game without an ounce of knowledge about him? Just gave him a one-of-a-kind, state-of-the-art supersuit and said, *Go ahead, kid. Fuck everything up. See if I care*.

If Spider-Man wants back in, it’s *his* turn to make the effort.

He's going to have to do a hell of a lot better than *Sorry*.

Tony stuffs the suit in a paper bag, stuffs the bag under his work bench.

It occurs to him, somewhere that is nearly blanched by his white-hot fury, that there is nothing stopping him from plugging the suit in, pulling up the Baby Monitor Protocol, and finding out once and for all who was behind the mask, and what he had to hide.

But he doesn't.

If Tony doesn't keep his word, who the hell is left that does?

Two days later, Tony is woken by his cell phone.

He's fallen asleep at his workbench. It's no wonder. Anger had kept him awake for nearly forty-eight hours before this—he only calmed down enough to put his head down about two hours ago. Tony sits up blearily, back aching, not even considering answering the phone, only thinking about whether he has the fortitude to cross the compound to his bedroom or if it's going to be a night spent on the much-less-comfortable-but-much-closer couch.

"Cut it to voicemail, FRI," he says, stretching his neck. "I'm not in."

"You're gonna want to take this one, boss."

That's as much preamble as FRIDAY gives him before she pulls the news up on every available screen in the lab.

And Tony immediately gets to his feet.

That's Coney Island. Tony recognizes it because of the roller coasters in the background, but it's not the rollercoasters that are featured now. It's the great swath of flame and debris covering the beach. It's the ruins of a crashed plane in the background. A plane Tony recognizes, because it belongs to him.

He answers the phone.

"You better get down here, Tony," says Happy, before Tony can say anything at all. "I might have messed this one up."

"You think?" Tony is already pulling on his shoes, summoning a suit. "What the hell happened to *asset management*, Happy? You're supposed to manage the assets, not blow them up!"

"Believe me, Tony, my head is under your boot for the foreseeable future. But that's not why you have to come."

And before Tony can ask what that means, Happy texts him a photo.

It's the guy from the ferry—the one the FBI has been after for months. The one Spider-Man tried to warn Tony about half a dozen times, only to have those warnings stomped on, shot down, ignored.

The guy from the ferry is webbed to a stack of crates.

“I’m on my way,” says Tony.

Tony lands on the beach half an hour later, head swirling with a discombobulating mix of contrition and terror. To his great surprise, however, Happy is not working on the rubble, or managing the news crews, or taking point while the police haul the man responsible for this mess away from it.

He is, in fact, standing behind a pile of smouldering garbage, staring at his phone.

Tony lands beside him, ignoring the shouts as reporters spot him. There is already a Stark security team on-scene, holding them off.

“Where is he?” says Tony. “Is he alive?”

“Oh,” says Happy, “he’s alive.”

And he holds up his phone.

For a second, Tony can’t understand what he’s looking at. Why is Happy showing him footage of some banged-up middle-aged man when they are literally standing in the middle of a flaming emergency?

Then Tony’s vision resolves. And he realizes he *recognizes* that middle-aged man, who is standing on the sidewalk in front of a familiar apartment building and speaking into a dozen microphones, his bruised face further marred by a vicious snarl.

“I want my kids back,” says Skip Westcott. “I want Spider-Man arrested. And I want the city to take some *goddamn* action. This should never have happened. This should never have been allowed to happen. Where are my kids? *Where are my kids?*”

Contrition disappears. Terror disappears.

Wrath takes their place.

Without a word to Happy, Tony suits back up.

“FRIDAY,” he says. “Find him. Now.”

FRIDAY does.

Spider-Man is on the edge of a building overlooking the East River, near the west side of the Brooklyn Bridge. Tony reduces thrust as soon as he spots him, knowing that Spider-Man will probably hear him approaching no matter how quiet he goes but wanting to get as close as possible before that happens in case he tries to do a runner. But even at a hundred, then fifty, then twenty

yards Spider-Man doesn't look up. Just grips the wall on which he's sitting and stares out over the water until Tony lands behind him with a muffled crunch.

Only then does Spider-Man raise his head. Even so it's listless, almost bored, and though Tony can't make out his expression behind his filthy mask and those ridiculous bug-eyed goggles, he has a feeling it's not one of apology.

The low-heat anger in which he's been simmering since he saw Westcott on the news reaches a sudden and violent boil.

Tony retracts the helmet, exposing that anger for Spider-Man to see.

"When I told you you screwed the pooch," he says, "what I meant was *back the hell off*, not go out and find a way to screw the pooch harder. And yet for some reason here we are."

Spider-Man appears to hesitate. For a second Tony thinks he's going to make a break for it and he tenses, ready to engage, but instead Spider-Man swings his legs over the wall to the roof side and gets to his feet, wobbling slightly.

"I saved your plane," he says.

The defiance in his voice is a smack in the face. Furthermore, it fills Tony's head with another voice, rising out of memory like a fossil out of tar.

I didn't know it was him.

The resurgence of Steve's betrayal sends Tony's self-control flying.

"Yeah?" He takes a step toward Spider-Man, not caring that the guy flinches when he does, not caring that the other, shorter man is covered in sand and soot and who knows what else—caring only that he put his trust in the wrong person *again*. "And then you went right ahead and undid *any* favor you might have gained with your little heroic act by *kidnapping three kids*."

"That's not how it went down," says Spider-Man, and the faint edge of a plea in his voice ratchets Tony's fury up a notch. "You don't know what was going on—what he's been doing to—to—"

"Who are we talking about here, Spider-Man?" Tony takes another step toward him. Spider-Man stumbles back, hits the wall. "You mean the polo-wearing, hotdog-grilling foster dad you punched in the face with all your super strength? The one who's won *numerous* awards for his work with kids, who takes in the ones *no one else* wants and then puts them through school on his own dime? Is that the villain in your story? Because when I warned you about branding, I didn't think I'd have to be this explicit about not *burning your name to the fucking ground* by attacking random New Yorkers!"

Against the wall, Spider-Man goes very still.

"That's not how it happened," he says hoarsely.

Tony can barely hear him over the roar in his own ears.

"Oh," he plows on, "and how about the fact that you're taking *me* down with you? Forget that everyone thought I was crazy to recruit you without ever seeing your face. Hell, let's even forget the fact that I threw the Sokovia Accords—which I lost my *best friend* over, by the way—out the window to play your little secret identity game. You don't mess with *kids*, jackass. That's hero one-oh-one." He points at Spider-Man's chest. "Let's play a logic game. If you're not the hero,

what's that make you?"

Spider-Man gulps.

"Why'd you take the kids?" Tony says. "And for that matter, *where* did you take them? Tell me now, because the longer you drag this out, bud, I promise you, the harder it's going to be."

"I can't tell you where they are. You'll send them back."

"You bet your ass I will. Are you really gonna make me—"

"Peter Parker."

Tony halts mid-step.

"What?"

"Peter Parker," says Spider-Man, louder this time. "He was the one—he told me that—that guy, Skip. Mr. Westcott. He told me about him. He said he's" —Spider-Man coughs— "he's not what he pretends he is. He—he hurts them, he—"

"Peter Parker." Tony's voice is flat and sharp at the same time, and Spider-Man immediately stops talking. "That's your source on this?"

Spider-Man nods.

"Funny," says Tony, "because I'm the one who looked into Peter Parker, and it seems to me *he* might be the one who isn't what he says he is. You wanna hear about your pal Peter, Spider-Man?"

Spider-Man shakes his head.

"Well, too bad. Because while you were off taking requests from every truant who made puppy-dog eyes in your direction, I was doing the research you should have done in the first place. The Parker kid? Yeah, he's got a rap sheet as long as you are tall. Let's lay it out, shall we? We can start with the old lady he shoved down a flight of stairs."

"I don't—"

"Not convincing enough for you? I get that. You're a discerning guy. Not everything is black and white, right? So let's look a little closer. How about the fact that he was caught trying to stab a kid at the halfway house they put him in after the old lady? Or the fights he got into at school, or how every one of his teachers described him as moody, withdrawn, unpleasant—"

"Stop!" says Spider-Man.

But Tony is only getting started. There are just a few feet between them now, and Tony closes the space, wanting to be in Spider-Man's face, wanting him to feel the heat of Tony's anger, of his own mistake, because the guy clearly doesn't listen, doesn't learn, and Tony is *done* with these unyielding, irrational, so-called heroes refusing to even *consider* the idea that their power comes with a bigger responsibility than just doing whatever the hell they want, when they want it.

"How does this all come back to you, you might be wondering?" he says. "I'll walk you through that, too. After the Parker kid nearly knifes his roommate, he gets one last chance. A foster parent who specializes in troubled kids. A place to stay that isn't juvie. But here's the thing about troubled

kids. They don't like discipline. They don't like structure—"

"That isn't—"

"—so when he figures out he's got rules to follow, people to obey," Tony goes on, voice rising, "he flies the coop. And when he meets some hapless, naive college *punk* in a fancy red superhero suit, he sees his perfect opportunity to get back at daddy."

Spider-Man doesn't say anything now. His chest heaves as he looks up at Tony, fingers splayed against the wall behind him.

"He fed you a story, Spider-Man," says Tony. "Made you think you were playing the big white knight to some helpless kid, but you want the truth? Here it is: you're not a knight. You're just some hired muscle for an angry teenage thug with a chip on his shoulder. Now *tell me where those kids are.*"

Spider-Man stops breathing heavily. In fact, it looks like he stops breathing *at all*.

When he speaks, his voice is harder than Tony has ever heard it. Harder than he could have imagined coming out of that stupid mask, or from the hapless college sophomore he imagines under it.

"You know, Mr. Stark," he says, "for a genius, sometimes you're really fucking stupid."

Before Tony has a chance to process this, Spider-Man flings a web in his face.

Tony's helmet is still retracted. The web gets in his eyes, his hair. He doubles over, coughs out, "Solvent!" and holds a hand in his face as FRIDAY deploys the web-dissolving chemical he formulated the same day he designed Spider-Man's suit from the nozzle on his gauntlet.

By the time he straightens up Spider-Man is three buildings away, swinging for a fourth.

"That's *it*."

Tony is beyond anger now. He's beyond fury. This is Obie, ripping Tony's heart out. This is Natasha, letting Bucky go. This is a shield in his chest and freezing snow all around while the man he thought was his friend climbs to safety alongside the one who murdered Tony's parents.

This is the next person Tony decided to trust flinging it back in his face, literally.

This is personal.

The helmet clunks into place, and Tony takes off.

Spider-Man might have a head start, but Tony has jet propulsors. Just as Spider-Man swings past an abandoned building on the edge of the river, Tony pulls up alongside him and swerves right.

They crash through a window together.

They're on the top level, the termite-eaten wood floor covered in dust and dirt and broken glass. Spider-Man goes sprawling across it, but Tony lands on his feet, and before the former can regain his Tony says, "FRIDAY, pin him."

Three sets of restraints detach from the suit and go spinning toward Spider-Man as he tries to stand. The first set wraps around his ankles, knocking him flat on his back. The other two take a wrist each, metal locking tight around flesh and fabric and then digging into the moldy slats of the floor

to pin his arms out to his sides.

Tony, who's seen Spider-Man hold up a jet bridge, knows he could rip the restraints out of the floor like wet paper. So he fires up a gauntlet, aims it at him and says, "*Stay down.*"

For once, Spider-Man listens. His head is turned to the side, away from Tony, but aside from this small defiance he is utterly motionless.

Tony has won. It should be enough.

It's not.

"You couldn't let it go, could you?" he says. "You couldn't admit you were wrong, just one time?"

"Boss?"

Somewhere deep in the back of his mind, Tony registers the uncertainty in FRIDAY's voice. But he's too far gone in his own righteous anger to figure out what it means.

"No," he says, "because that's what *heroes* like you do. You run around doing whatever you want, destroying whatever you want, and refusing to even *entertain* the notion that maybe you don't know what's best for the world because you're convinced that you alone can determine—"

"Boss."

"—that you alone get to decide what's good and evil, and to hell with whoever gets their life ruined on your quest for the ultimate do-goody bullshit, right, Steve? You—"

"Boss! He isn't breathing!"

The steady stream of poison Tony's been expelling through his mouth catches in his throat. His anger drains in a cataclysmic rush, replaced by the sudden and overwhelming numbness of fear.

Just as suddenly, the red haze Tony didn't realize was hanging over his vision recedes, allowing him to see clearly for the first time since he suited up on the beach.

What he sees is this:

Spider-Man's suit isn't just covered in dirt. It's also so shredded in places that skin shows through, and nearly every inch of the skin that's showing is crusted with blood—blood, which is also covering a good half of what remains of the fabric. There is a wound in his shoulder that's still oozing, visible even under the concealing dark of a dozen other kinds of filth. His hands, upturned by the restraints, are covered in deep, weeping burns. There's blood on the mask, too, coming from the place where his lips should be.

Just as FRIDAY said, Spider-Man does not appear to be breathing.

Tony sucks in a hitching breath of his own and, without thinking, steps out of the suit and drops to his knees beside him.

"FRIDAY, heartbeat."

A terrible pause, then—

"He's got one. It's off-the-charts fast, though." Another pause. "Boss. I think he's holding his breath."

Tony doesn't even consider the promise he's breaking. Terror moves his hand for him.

He reaches out, and takes off the mask.

Truth

The goggles clatter on the desiccated wood as Tony tosses them aside.

And then Tony is staring down at Spider-Man's face. But it's not the face of a twenty-year-old college student, like Tony was praying it would be—even though in the half second between his brain telling his hand to move and actually moving, Tony realized he knew exactly what he was going to find underneath the mask.

Peter Parker looks just enough like his CPS photo to be recognizable. But where the kid in that file was scrawny, rumped, miserable-looking (*Of course he was you goddamn idiot*, Tony thinks, *that photo was taken right after his uncle died*), this slightly-older Peter just looks wrecked.

His hair is too long, greasy and tangled and matted with blood. The floodlight FRIDAY has turned on in the hovering suit makes the shadows under his eyes and the concave pits of his cheeks all the more prominent, as it does the lack of any sort of stubble on those cheeks. He's got a cut above his right eye and another through his bottom lip. His forehead is smattered with bruises, like he's just been through ten rounds with a heavyweight champion.

No—worse. Like he's just been in plane crash, gotten into a fist fight with his former foster father, and then had his ass handed to him by a man in a jet-powered metal super-suit.

"*Shit*," says Tony. "Shit, shit, *shit*."

The enormity of this particular fuck-up descends rapidly, pressing on Tony's chest, making his next breath wheeze. It is only with a massive force of will that he shoves the pressure aside, because he has someone else's breathing—or lack thereof—to contend with.

FRIDAY was right. Spider-Man—Peter Parker—is holding his breath. Tony knows this because even though Peter's eyes are shut, they are *clenched* shut, in a way only someone making a conscious effort could manage. His lips are moving, too subtly for Tony to make out what he's saying, but as Tony watches them they part, draw in a breath that sounds like a sheet of metal being torn in half, and close firmly.

For the first time in a long time, Tony doesn't know what to do. It's not even that he doesn't have any bad ideas—he doesn't have any ideas *at all*.

"FRIDAY," he croaks. "What was he saying?"

"I think he was saying, 'get off.'"

And why did Tony program his AI to be able to sound so dismayed? He needs her to be the calm one, because he has no recourse for this, no contingency plan for the fact that he is suddenly sitting on the top floor of an abandoned building with a kid he just called *an angry teenage thug* to his face, a kid who also happens to be Spider-Man. He has no way to handle the pain that slices through his chest when FRIDAY translates the kid's silently moving lips, nor the terrible premonition that is forming in the back of his mind as he watches those same lips desperately hold in a long draw of air.

"I don't—" he says, and luckily this is all FRIDAY needs.

"I'm gonna let him up," she says.

The restraints spring loose. Peter's limbs thunk to the floor, but he doesn't open his eyes, doesn't take a breath. Doesn't move.

"You gotta talk to him, boss. Panic attack protocol."

"That's *Pepper's* protocol. For me. I don't—"

"I'll walk you through it. But first you gotta get him to take a breath."

Tony steels himself. Inches toward Peter's supine body on his knees, but stops short of touching.

"Kid?" he says, voice simultaneously soft and strangled. "Kid. It's me. It's Tony—Mr. Stark. I know I put on a real show back there, but you gotta put it aside for a second and breathe, do you hear me?"

No response.

"I think he's having a flashback," says FRIDAY. "You have to ground him. Get him back to the present."

"I'm *trying*. Kid. Kid. *Peter*."

At last Tony reaches out, puts a hand lightly on Peter's shoulder.

He doesn't know if it's the name or the touch that does it: only that suddenly Peter's eyes snap open, lock onto Tony's, and go wide with unmistakable terror.

Peter leaps to his feet and shoves Tony back. Tony goes sprawling, feels bruises blossoming on his collar bone—even in this state the kid is *strong*—and scrambles to sit up just in time to see Peter dash for the nearest window.

"*Wait!*"

But his shout is unnecessary. Peter makes it two feet before his legs give out—just fold underneath him like Tony has seen in videos of marathoners, their bodies failing on the last stretch of a race. The kid staggers—one step, two—and then collapses against the far wall, where he curls into a tight ball and holds a quaking arm out towards Tony.

"*Don't touch me!*"

Tony rises to his knees, hands held out to his sides.

"I'm not gonna touch you, kid," he says, starting to shuffle toward Peter. "I'm just—"

"Stay there! Don't—don't come—don't come—!"

But the rest of the sentence is lost in a hacking cough.

When Peter tries to draw another breath, it won't come.

Tony gets to his feet, still holding his hands up.

"*No!*"

"Kid, you gotta listen," says Tony. "I'm not gonna touch you, okay? I swear, I'm not. But you *have* to take a breath, okay? You're freaking out right now and—"

“I’m not—I’m not—” A horrifying gasp. “Asth—asthma. It’s—”

“It’s not asthma,” says Tony, as FRIDAY confirms this in his earpiece. “It feels like asthma, but you’re having a panic attack. You need to calm down, it’s the only way it’s gonna go away, okay? Trust me, I know.”

At that Peter stills a little, glances at Tony from under his raised arm.

“Good,” Tony says. “Okay. Just listen to my voice, okay? You’re fine, you’re—”

But Tony breaks off, because the kid is clearly as far from *fine* as it’s possible to be.

“Ground him,” says FRIDAY again. “Give him something to focus on. Describe what’s happening.”

“Okay,” says Tony. “Okay, listen, I need you to—to just put your hand on the floor, can you do that?”

To Tony’s surprise, Peter complies instantly, groping down until his fingers find dust and wood.

“Good,” says Tony. “You feel that, right? That’s the wood floor. There’s dirt all over it, because I’m guessing we’re the only people who’ve been up here in about five decades. And behind you is the wall, can you feel it against your back? We’re in an old building. It’s just you and me. We were fighting a second ago but—but we aren’t now, okay? And all evidence to the contrary, I promise you, I am *not* going to hurt you.”

Peter’s next breath still sounds painful, but Tony sees his chest expand with it, feels his own chest loosen incrementally in response.

“Good,” he says. “That’s really good. Do that again, kid. Follow me, like this.”

Tony demonstrates an exaggerated breath and is unbelievably relieved when Peter follows, and then follows the next breath, and the next. He keeps going, taking in great gulps of dust-heavy air and watching the kid do the same until—

Peter goes limp. Like a puppet with its strings cut, he sags against the wall, his legs sliding out in front of him, arms dropping to his sides. It’s such a total change that for a second Tony thinks he’s passed out, but then he hears the little stutter in Peter’s next breath, and sees the tears dripping down his nose, cutting trails through the soot and dust and blood.

“Okay,” says Tony again. “Okay, you’re okay.”

He has an overwhelming instinct to move toward the kid, but he resists it, remembering the fear in Peter’s eyes when he first saw Tony crouching over him. Instead Tony lowers himself slowly to sit once more, a good ten feet away from where Peter is silently crying.

“Good job, boss,” FRIDAY whispers.

Tony’s stomach clenches. He’s pretty sure he’s never done a worse job of anything in his entire life, and that includes everything he did before Afghanistan.

“Kid?” he says. “Peter, can you look at me?”

Peter squeezes his eyes shut, and there’s so much shame in the gesture Tony winces.

“You are Peter, aren’t you? Peter Parker?”

A pause, then Peter nods.

Tony lets out a slow breath.

“I gotta be honest, then. This is not how I thought tonight was going to go.”

Peter whispers something, too quiet to hear.

“Sorry kid. We’ll keep the distance, but you gotta speak up.”

Peter puts a hand to his eyes—more shame—but raises his voice when he says, “Please don’t send me back.”

Another lancet of pain in Tony’s chest.

“Send you... back where?”

Peter groans and lifts his other hand to press to his eyes. The tears are flowing more freely now, spilling out around the blistered red skin on his palms.

“Sorry,” he says. “Sorry, I shouldn’t be—I can’t—just give me a minute.”

He’s embarrassed, Tony realizes, and it makes his own guilt rise. Peter is not the one who should be ashamed right now.

“Hey,” Tony says. “Hey kid, look at me. Please.”

Peter hesitates, swallowing loudly enough that Tony can hear it even though he is still a good three yards away. When Peter looks up his eyes are shining, made all the bigger by the fact that he looks like he hasn’t had a good meal in Tony doesn’t want to think how long. And, of course, by the fact that he’s a *kid*.

“Peter, how old are you?”

Tony knows. He read it in the file. But part of him still wants to deny it.

Peter, on the other hand, looks faintly bemused by the question.

“I’m....” He frowns. “Fourteen. No. What month is it?”

“... September.”

“I guess I’m fifteen, then.”

Christ, it just gets worse. And Tony knows it’s far from over.

“Peter Parker disappeared in March,” he says. “Where have you been staying since then?”

Peter’s shoulders spasm. Like his flight instinct is insisting he make another dash for the window, but his body can’t work out the movements.

“Around.”

“No way, kid. It’s truth time, for both of us. The only way I’m gonna fix this monumental clusterfu... mess of a situation is if I have the details. You gotta level with me.”

And it’s incredible: Tony can actually *see* the walls rise up in Peter’s expression. Now that the

flashback has passed and his breathing is returning to normal the kid is rapidly regaining his faculties, and when he has his wits about him everything in the way he looks at Tony screams mistrust.

When Peter purses his lips and meets Tony's eye with a sharpness like black flint, Tony realizes he's still being an idiot if he thinks it's going to be as easy as demanding the truth. After the show Tony just put on, the kid has every right to refuse to speak to him ever again. And if it weren't for the fact that there are three other kids whose lives are potentially in danger—though what *kind* of danger keeps warping nauseatingly in Tony's mind—Tony would almost be tempted to let him.

"Alright," he says. "Let's... put that question on the back burner for now. Peter. I'm sorry, but you have to tell me where those kids are."

Peter flinches, but holds Tony's gaze. Like he was expecting this.

"Why don't you just arrest me and get it over with?" He coughs again. "I'm not telling you, man, so just send me to the Raft or whatever. I don't care anymore."

"The Raft? Who said anything about the Raft?"

Peter frowns.

"You did. The Sokovia Accords? You said it yourself, I... I broke them when I got involved without showing you who I am so..."

"No. No no no, *I* broke the Sokovia Accords. And to be honest the Accords were... probably broken to begin with."

"But you said—"

"In case you didn't notice, I wasn't exactly present in the moment back there either. Can we just... pretend the last thirty minutes didn't happen? Actually, strike that; can we pretend the last four months didn't happen?"

Peter eyes him warily and says nothing.

Tony sighs, rubs a hand over his forehead.

"Peter, I'm not gonna send you to jail. I want to help you."

"Really? Because I thought I was an angry teenage truant who hates discipline."

As soon as the words are out of his mouth Peter's eyes go wide. But the damage is done: shame like molten metal bubbles on the back of Tony's neck.

Peter must see it, because he says, "Mr. Stark, I'm—"

"For the love of all that is holy and unholy in this messed up world, please do *not* apologize for calling me out on what was probably the worst thing I've ever said. Jesus, Spider-Man—Peter. I didn't know it was you under there."

"Does it matter?"

Peter's voice is genuine. His questioning gaze is genuine. But to Tony it still feels like an accusation.

“It doesn’t. I shouldn’t have said it no matter what, and I’m sorry. But... Peter” —he makes his voice as gentle as he can manage— “you need to tell me what you did with the kids. Half the city is on a manhunt for you—Spider-Man—right now, and even I won’t be able to protect you if I don’t know *why*. And if they find them—and they will find them eventually—”

“They didn’t find me.”

Defiance. A hint of pride. It’s the first thing Tony’s heard in the kid’s voice since he unmasked him that he wants to keep around, but he can’t.

“No,” he says, “but your foster siblings don’t have superpowers. And right now they don’t have you either. Not unless you let me help you.”

The defiance falls away, like snow breaking off a mountain at the beginning of an avalanche. Tony can see Peter fighting back tears again, has another overwhelming urge to go to him. Staves it off once more.

“You said—you said you’d send them back.”

“And then I said to forget I ever said that. I can’t make any promises until you give me all the facts, kid, but I can swear to you I’m not going to let them get hurt. Iron Man, remember? I take people out of danger, I don’t drop them in it.”

Except when I kidnap missing fourteen year olds and transport them across international lines to fight my superpowered friends.

But Tony doesn’t say this.

And somehow, miraculously, Peter seems to believe him—or at least to consider it—though he still chews on his tongue for a moment before replying.

“I can’t... I can’t just tell you,” he says. “First I have to know... I have to be sure you won’t take them back to Skip.”

“Then you have to at least give me a clue, kid, because I’m flailing here. Right now the whole city thinks the guy is a hero who tried to fight off the supervillain kidnapping his kids. If I’m gonna convince them otherwise I need one hell of a story. Was he hitting them? If he was, what changed tonight? You’ve been going back there what, once a week? Why not take them any other time?”

Peter’s breath hitches on the next inhale. He lowers his head.

“Because I thought... I thought it was only me.”

Tony’s molten shame turns to ice.

When Tony doesn’t reply, Peter looks up, his voice going frantic.

“You have to believe me, Mr. Stark, I never would’ve left them there if I thought... he told me—he *told* me I was the only one. That I was—that he couldn’t help it with me. It was stupid. It was so *stupid*, but I believed him, and I thought if I left, that would be the end of it. And I know he never did anything to the girls, so I left without them, but I always went back to check just in case and when I went tonight he had that new kid, Manny, and I saw... I just knew. And I freaked out. I know I should have handled it better but I wasn’t thinking, I just, this instinct kicked in and I had to—I had to get them out of there, I couldn’t—”

“Peter. *Stop.*”

Peter does. But just for a second.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

Tony stands. He tries not to notice how Peter presses himself back just slightly, as though he expects Tony to lunge at him. But Peter makes no attempt to get up.

“I have to make a phone call,” Tony says.

He turns away from Peter abruptly—though not abruptly enough to miss the expression of humiliation and resignation that gathers on his face as Tony does. But he can’t turn back, because there’s no way he can let the kid see the expression on *his* face until he has it under control.

“FRIDAY,” he says into his earpiece, “get me Maria Hill. Force it through if you have to.”

He hasn’t heard from any of the old SHIELD crowd since he sent Clint to the Raft. But to his surprise, FRIDAY doesn’t have to force the call. Maria picks up on the second ring.

“Hill,” she says.

“Maria, it’s Tony.”

Her momentary silence solves the mystery of the quick pick-up. Clearly she didn’t glance at the caller ID before answering.

When she does reply, her voice is cold.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve calling me at home, Stark.”

“I know,” says Tony. “And I recognize you probably aren’t my biggest fan right now—”

“I’m hanging up—”

“*Please,*” Tony says. “Think what you want about me being a shitty human or a shitty Avenger or whatever, but Maria, you know me well enough to know I wouldn’t be calling under these god-awful circumstances unless it was important.”

Another momentary silence. Then a sigh.

“If this is about the plane crash, Stark, I work for *Pepper* now, not you. Avengers business is—”

“Do you still have contacts in the NYPD?”

“I—what?”

“The NYPD,” Tony repeats. “You’re watching the news, apparently, so you must have seen what they’re saying about Spider-Man, right?”

He hears Peter shift behind him.

“You mean the guy *you* recruited to help put my friends away? Yeah, I saw that he’s wanted for being a kid snatcher. And if that doesn’t speak volumes about your taste in allies I—”

“Hill, I need you to arrest Steven Westcott.”

There's a muffled noise, like Hill is taking the phone off speaker.

"Are you kidding me right now?" Sure enough, her voice is louder, clearer. "Every channel in New York is calling him the Dad of Midtown, and after all the crappy press your guy has been getting the city is ready to pounce. And in case you didn't notice, there's *video* evidence your guy grabbed those kids. In fact, if you know something—"

"Westcott was molesting them." A short intake of breath from behind him, but still Tony doesn't turn around. "Spider-Man wasn't kidnapping them, he was saving them."

Now Maria's silence sounds enormous, even though it lasts just a second.

"Are you sure?" she says.

"I'm positive. Unfortunately."

"You have proof?"

"I'm working on it. I'll get it, but I need you to get out ahead of this before the Midtown Dad bullshit gets too far. Can you help me?"

Noises in the background now, like Hill is moving around.

"I'm on it," she says. "Give me an hour."

Tony closes his eyes, relief for her quick acquiescence weakening his knees.

"Thank you, Maria."

"Talk to you later, Stark."

She hangs up.

Tony takes two deep breaths. It's all he can allow himself.

He turns around.

Peter looks up at him, wide-eyed, his mouth hanging open slightly. Like he can't quite work out what just happened.

"Kid," says Tony, "that was a friend of mine. She's going to—"

"I heard her. Is she really gonna... can she really do that?"

"She can. She will."

"It... can't be that easy. It *won't* be that easy. You lied, you don't have proof, you only have what I told you and" —his eyes go wider— "you aren't gonna make me *tell* —? Mr. Stark, please, I can't —"

"Hey, hey, hey. You're getting *way* ahead of yourself, kid. Let's not... let's not think about that part yet, okay? We're just getting that" —*monster, a monster I defended ten minutes ago*— "piece out of the way. I'm not gonna make you do anything. I just want to know where the kids are, so I can get them somewhere safe."

Peter still looks like he doesn't believe him. Like he *can't* believe him.

How many times has he reached out for help and been shot down? How many times has he tried to show someone the truth and been met with exactly the same crap Tony fed him before he knew what was under the mask? How many guarantees have been broken by the people who were supposed to protect him—including Tony?

Tony has nothing. No way to counter what is clearly an unfathomably long history of pain, the evidence of which is slumped in front of him covered in blood and uncertainty, without falling woefully short of what's necessary.

"Peter," Tony says, "please."

Peter closes his eyes. Wrinkles his brow, as though he is forcing down some bitter medicine. And then gets to his feet.

He has to use the wall as leverage, and still he staggers, knees quaking. But Tony lets him do it on his own, more afraid of touching him now than he is of the kid keeling over, which is saying something. Tony's guilt is a behemoth, growing larger with each passing moment.

"They're with my friend Michelle," says Peter. "I'll take you."

Tony sends the suit back to his Upper East Side penthouse. He summons a self-driving car to take its place, and while it makes its way toward them he and Peter pick their way down the rickety stairs that lead out of the warehouse, Peter going first, leaning heavily on the rotted guard rail.

Peter doesn't say anything when he sees the driverless town car idling by the curb. Just clambers into the front seat and puts his head in his hands, and doesn't look up when Tony sits in the driver's seat, punches in the address Peter gave him and starts to drive, eyeing the kid in the corner of his vision the entire time.

Tony's mind is occupied. He's still wondering where the hell he's going to put these kids when he finds them, and what state they'll be in. He has the feeling Peter won't be amenable to involving CPS, but he's pretty sure he has to if *he* wants to avoid being arrested, so he's wondering how he's going to deal with the fallout of the kid's obvious and debilitating need to protect others when it inevitably comes to that. The social worker he spoke to last week is probably already on this—there's no way Tony can protect those kids without alerting her.

He's thinking, too, of the two people he *wishes* he could call, above all others: First, Pepper. Second, Steve.

Pepper would know how to help Tony, who is still fighting off the threat of his own panic attack.

Steve would know how to help the kid. Of course he would, because once upon a time he *was* the kid.

But he can't call either. Because Pepper still needs space, and Steve...

Tony is on his own.

Rising above all of this—the what-ifs, the loneliness of this unexpected turn of events, the squeeze of his heart and lungs—is another, even more pressing problem: what is he going to do with *this*

kid?

Because there's no way in hell he's sending him back into the city—Peter is clearly homeless, and has been for a while—and he's also not putting him back in the system. Tony only has a fraction of the story and he can already tell the kid has been screwed over by that mess more times than he's had birthdays.

But where do you send an orphaned, traumatized teenager who also happens to have superpowers? Tony is achingly aware he is probably the least qualified person in the universe to deal with what the kid's been through. He is the most famous man in the world, not only for his genius but for his recklessness, reviled by as many people as he is admired, and his life is constantly in danger. What's more, he's rarely at *any* of his homes, and his most extensive experience with kids up until now consists of one weekend spent building makeshift weapons in a pre-teen's garage... and, apparently, shouting down a homeless fifteen-year-old for trying to do some good in an unimaginably shitty circumstance.

He shouldn't be the one to help him.

He also has a needling sense he might be the only one who can.

(Of course, there is a very obvious answer to the question *Where am I going to take this kid?* but in his distraction, Tony misses it until it is almost too late.)

Peter hasn't moved or spoken throughout the drive, and Tony has allowed him his silence, but as he pulls the car up to the curb he turns to him and says, "Hey, kid. We're here."

Peter doesn't respond. He's still got his forehead in his hands, so Tony can't see much of his face behind the barricade of his left arm, but when Peter doesn't so much as twitch Tony feels a surge of terrible foreboding.

"Kid? Peter."

Nothing. The foreboding rises.

Tony doesn't want to touch him. Not only is he aware Peter could easily rip his arm off, he also feels sick at the thought of disregarding the one request Peter has made of him tonight. But he has to.

Tony reaches out, shakes Peter's shoulder.

Peter's hands slip off his forehead. He slumps forward, his head knocking into the glove compartment, shoulder wedging between the door and the console.

He doesn't move. Doesn't even open his eyes.

"Oh, *shit*."

Tony moves so fast he doesn't notice what he's doing until he's out of the car and around the other side, yanking the passenger door open and reaching out to catch Peter when he falls sideways out of it. Peter's head lolls as Tony lifts him back into the car, leaning the seat back as far as he can with his free hand to lay him on it.

He presses a hand to Peter's neck. There is a terrible moment where he can't tell if it's a heartbeat he's feeling or his own shaking, and then he sticks his fingers under the kid's nose instead and feels a puff of warm breath.

“Okay,” Tony says, trying to calm himself. “Peter. Peter, pal, you have to wake up.”

He taps Peter lightly on the cheek, but only succeeds in making his head fall to one side, his neck limp.

When Tony peels back an eyelid, Peter’s eyes are rolled so far back in his head only the barest sliver of iris is visible.

“*Shit!*” Tony says again. “FRIDAY—”

“The scanners in this vehicle aren’t advanced enough, boss,” she says immediately. “I’d suggest getting him to a hospital ASAP.”

Of course she would. *Of course*, because that’s the first fucking thing Tony should have done, before he even thought of the other kids, should have done it the second he unmasked him and saw how sunken Peter’s cheeks looked, how he staggered when he tried to run, or at the *latest* when the kid was hanging onto the guardrail on their way downstairs like it was the last thing tethering him to the ground.

Instead of returning to the driver’s seat Tony goes to the back, where he positions himself so he can hook his hands under Peter’s arms and drag him to lie flat in the backseat, his head resting on Tony’s lap. It’s not ideal—he’s banking on a lack of spinal injuries based on how the kid was moving around earlier, though if there’s one area Tony is lacking critical expertise, it’s in his medical knowledge—but the driver’s seat is too awkward, and he needs to monitor the kid’s breathing.

FRIDAY takes the wheel.

“Where are you taking us, FRI?” says Tony as they weave back into traffic, speeding but moving fluidly so as not to jostle Peter, who has remained unnervingly still throughout. “I don’t think we have time to make it upstate.”

Now that he’s looking closely, he can see blood in Peter’s half-open mouth.

“Midtown Memorial,” says FRIDAY. “Their ER is currently least crowded, and they have the highest-rated pediatric surgeon in the state on staff.”

How long, Tony wonders, before reminders of Spider-Man’s age don’t make him want to throw up?

Longer than a night, at least. Probably a lot longer.

He puts a hand on Peter’s cheek, ostensibly to steady him against the movement of the car, but really because he needs the warmth of the kid’s skin to reassure him.

“Hang in there, kid,” he murmurs. “You don’t get to deliver the biggest *I told you so* in the history of mankind and then tap out before you cash in, you hear me?”

Peter doesn’t respond.

For All Intents and Purposes

The car halts in front of the ER entrance, and FRIDAY says, “Wait a minute, boss. I’m having them page Dr. Brainerd, the surgeon I mentioned.”

“Any word from Hill?”

In Tony’s lap, Peter remains unconscious. The only change has been a slight wheeze in his breath, which appeared about five minutes ago.

“Not yet. I’m monitoring every channel, though.”

“Then keep it subtle. One whiff of the cops and you get us out of here, got it?”

“Got it, boss.”

There is a brief silence, filled only by the rattle in Peter’s chest. Tony wonders whether he should risk propping him up, because the rattle is starting to sound wet, like his lungs are full of fluid.

Before he can decide, the rear door in front of him opens, and a middle-aged woman in scrubs and a white jacket sticks her head inside. She has frizzy red hair, haphazardly tied back, and is wearing slightly-lopsided glasses over eyes that go wide the moment she sees who is in the backseat.

“Oh, my god,” she says.

Tony tightens his grip on Peter’s shoulder.

“Can you help him?”

The doctor swallows, hard, but she regains her composure a lot faster than most people who bump into him randomly—and to her credit, that usually happens in coffee shops, not while he’s sitting in the back of a driverless car, clutching a bleeding and unconscious teenager.

It is this teenager to whom the doctor turns her attention now. Her momentary hesitation over, she climbs into the back seat and crouches awkwardly on the floor to get a better look at him, hand immediately going to Peter’s wrist, while the other digs for her penlight.

“What happened?” she says, now peering into a still-rolled-back eye.

“I don’t know all of it. He was in a plane crash—”

She looks up sharply, then back down at Peter, just as sharply. Tony sees her eyes sweep over what remains of his costume, sees the pieces falling into place, and clenches his teeth to brace himself.

“Is this—?”

“He’s fifteen,” Tony says, aware of the plea in his own voice and, for once, not caring. “The news doesn’t have the whole story, and neither do I, but I know he’s—please. He’s fifteen.”

The doctor holds Tony’s gaze for a second, and then she looks down at Peter.

She expels a short burst of air through her nose. Then she clambers to the door, shouts for a gurney, and ducks back into the car, this time pulling a pair of scissors out of her pocket. Without pausing, she slips them into the cuff of Peter’s sweatpants and starts cutting.

“Hey, hey, he’s—”

“Mr. Stark, I promise I won’t call anyone, but unfortunately I can’t say the same for everyone on staff here. The last thing I saw on the news was that the city has a ten-thousand dollar reward out for anyone who brings this fifteen-year-old in. We need to get rid of his costume anyway so I can examine him, might as well do it here.”

Tony swears, nods, and braces Peter’s neck while she fumbles with the web-shooters for just a second, then slides the scissors up the length of his sleeve and down the side of his sweatshirt-vest.

Tony and Dr. Brainerd give identical gasps as she pulls the remains of the suit away, leaving Peter in just his tatty, ancient boxers.

It’s worse than Tony imagined, and considering the nightmare of the last hour, that is saying something. In addition to the burns on his hands and the abrasions on his face, Peter has a deep wound in his shoulder, like someone has stabbed him. Almost every inch of his torso is covered in bruises, ranging in color from red to the kind of black that Tony knows can only signify a devastating blow, and possibly internal bleeding. There is a concave spot on his right side ribcage that certainly shouldn’t be, and so many little scrapes and cuts Tony can’t even begin to take count.

Somehow, this isn’t the worst of it. The worst is how *thin* Peter is. Tony would make insane, bankrupting bets the kid has barely an ounce of fat on him, and yet he’s thin in a way Tony has never seen before, because even though his chest and stomach are so underdeveloped they are practically hollow, they are still, somehow, corded with wiry muscle.

Dr. Brainerd must have noticed too, because she says, “How much can you tell me about his enhancement?”

But before Tony can give her the shameful truth—that he knows practically nothing—a pair of nurses stick their heads and arms into the car.

And they lift Peter out of his lap.

Tony almost calls after them. He is inexplicably bereft without the weight of the kid’s head on his leg, but he swallows the words at the last moment, and instead climbs out of the backseat just in time to see the medical team disappear into the emergency room, Peter limp and exposed on the gurney between them.

And then Tony is alone on the asphalt, the lights of the ambulance bay bleaching his vision, his hands shaking at his sides.

What now?

The answer comes immediately.

Now I go murder Steven Westcott.

The thought is so clear that Tony begins to obey without question, turning back toward his car and halfway through summoning a suit on his StarkPhone when another thought, just as powerful as the first, halts him.

Don’t leave the kid alone again.

For a second, Tony is perfectly suspended in the vacuum of these terrible choices—abandoning the kid while he’s at his most vulnerable, or letting the scum who put him there continue to breathe for

even another moment.

He genuinely can't decide.

Thankfully, he doesn't have to. Because at that moment, his phone rings.

It's already in his hand. Tony answers without thinking.

"Stark."

"Tony, it's Maria. We've got Westcott in custody. The NYPD is bringing him in now."

Tony closes his eyes, relief making him sway.

"Maria, I can't thank you enough."

"That's debatable," she says, "but don't start just yet. I don't know how long they're going to be able to hold him without some compelling evidence, they're already giving me grief about it. You'd better have one hell of a clincher, Stark."

Tony looks toward the ER doors.

"Yeah, and he's currently unconscious in a Manhattan emergency room," he mutters.

"What?"

"Just... keep him there, okay? I'll let you know what's going on when I have a better idea myself."

"Okay," says Maria slowly. "Tony... are you okay? You sound—"

She cuts herself off.

"Thanks again, Maria," says Tony, suddenly weary. "I'll keep you updated."

He hangs up. Squares himself toward the ER, already dialing another number in his phone as he does.

"Tony, what the hell is going on?" says Happy, answering before the first ring has finished. "I have a whole swarm of reporters on this beach, and instead of asking about the *plane that just crashed* on Coney Island, they want to know about the little punk who crashed it. Tell me you have him. Tell me you've got those gauntlets around his skinny little neck, because—"

"Happy," says Tony, "please shut the hell up."

Happy does.

"Leave the beach," says Tony. "We've got more important things to worry about."

"Are you joking right now? That's—"

"Leave the beach, Happy!" Tony shouts. "Please, for once, just—don't fight me on this. I need you to do something for me, and I need you to do it *right now*, so can you just—"

The noise in the background of Happy's end of the call dies down.

"Tell me what to do, boss," he says.

Tony exhales.

“I need you to go pick up some kids.”

When Tony was in his twenties, he would frequently go out for the night and come home with things he didn't intend to procure. Being young, rich, and mostly drunk meant that ordinary restrictions—like common sense—did not apply, and so these things took the shape of a wide range of objects and substances. Tony's favorite was a life-size stuffed elephant, which had become a prop for some of his more immature early board meetings, specifically when the board wanted to confront him on some new bit of bad behavior (the pun being too good to pass up). The worst was a new designer hallucinogen that had him gibbering with waking nightmares for forty-eight hours, at the end of which Jarvis had told him, unequivocally, that if anything of the sort happened again, that would be the last Tony would ever see of him.

Tony had thought the incident with the drugs marked the end of his “what's the weirdest thing I can acquire tonight” phase, but apparently he was wrong. And apparently he's gotten better at it in his later years, because tonight's acquisition is by far the strangest: tonight, Tony has acquired a kid.

It wasn't even on purpose. When he walked back into the ER after giving Happy the instructions for finding Peter's foster siblings, he had only intended to... maintain a watchful eye, maybe, or to make sure the police didn't come bursting in looking for Spider-Man. He had even bought a baseball cap off a stunned-looking college kid who was in for the mother of all skinned knees (and was boasting about the dive he'd taken off his road bike, to nobody's amusement but his own) and then retreated to the shadowiest corner of the waiting room, not wanting to attract attention.

But, as usual, attention found him anyway. This time it came in the form of a mousy-looking intake clerk, who looked about ready to vomit with nerves when she approached him with a tablet in-hand.

“Mr. Stark?”

“Tony,” said Tony, glancing around. “Actually, let's keep on a no-name basis, please. You have an update on the kid?”

The clerk swallowed.

“I—they're still working on him. But they said you brought him in?”

Tony nodded.

“He didn't have any ID on him, but we did a facial scan—”

“You *what*?”

“It's standard, whenever we don't have identification. Your kid came back as Peter Parker—”

Tony swore under his breath. He was about to curse whatever idiot sold facial recognition tech to this public hospital, but then he remembered that idiot was him.

“—CPS is sending someone, but they asked us to get in touch with his foster parent as well, a” — she checked her notes— “Steven Westcott, and he’s not answering his phone. Do you have any idea how we can get a hold of him?”

Tony’s mind went white. The scumbag was *still listed* as Peter’s foster parent?

That was when he decided to get others involved.

Which is why, an hour and a half later, there are two Stark security employees undercover at every hospital entrance, in case the people at CPS miss the fact that they’re no longer responsible for Peter Parker. It is also why three of Tony’s lawyers are standing in front of him, looking as nervous as he has ever seen them as they try to dissuade him from signing the papers they have brought for him to sign.

“Mr. Stark,” says the tallest one, whose name Tony can’t remember but who seems to be sweating the most, and therefore might be in charge, “I think I should emphasize that this is a legal guardianship in *every sense* of the term. The implications for your holdings, if you assume an heir, could be massive. Clearly you’re rushing into this, maybe we should—”

“You just got me a full human child in less than two hours,” says Tony, scrawling his signature and shoving the forms back at the sweaty man. “I trust you’ll be able to figure out the holdings. Now please excuse yourself. Clearly being in such close proximity to benevolence is making you ill, and I’d rather not have you ralph all over my best jogging shoes.”

The lawyers take their leave.

Only once they are gone does Tony let his own nausea make an appearance. He sinks into the waiting room chair, face in his hands, and blows a shaky breath between his fingers.

I just adopted a kid, he thinks. *How in the hell did that happen?*

Well. Technically he just assumed legal guardianship over a kid. Even his lawyers couldn’t do adoption that fast, under these shitty of circumstances, but still. The whole thing feels heavy, surreal, and probably dubiously legal at best.

But when you’re Tony Stark, terms like *legal* and *illegal* tend to take on an amorphous quality.

He can hammer out the morality of the thing when this god-awful night is over. For now the important thing is that Peter Parker is no longer tied to Skip Westcott in any manner, at least not as far as the law is concerned.

This becomes especially important when Dr. Brainerd finally appears sometime in the small hours of the morning and says, “Is Peter Parker’s family here?”

Tony gets to his feet.

Dr. Brainerd sees him, and Tony registers her look of surprise. He sees her check something on her tablet while he approaches. Sees her expression shift to one of comprehension and, unless he’s very much mistaken, disapproval.

He can’t resent her for it. He doesn’t even approve of himself at the moment.

“That was fast,” she says, handing him the tablet. “Sign here.”

“And what am I signing?”

“Approvals,” she says, “for all the procedures I just performed. I went ahead and assumed his guardians wouldn’t have a problem with me saving his life. Was I correct?”

She was. Tony signs.

“How bad?” he says, handing the tablet back.

“Should I give it to you alphabetically, or head to toe?”

“Just tell me.”

She sighs.

“You said he was in a plane crash?”

Tony nods.

“Well, that only explains half of what we found in terms of injuries. Multiple contusions and abrasions, hairline fractures to both tibias and fibulas, seven cracked ribs, two broken ribs, hairline fractures to both clavicles, majorly sprained wrists and ankles—all of which is consistent with what we might see in someone who was thrown from a moving vehicle. More mysterious is the stab wound to his right shoulder—and, of course, the injuries to his back. He has fractures all along his spinal column, a small bleed in his liver, one in his right lung, another in his right kidney, and the bruising pattern on his back is consistent with a major crush injury.”

“I’m sorry, did you say someone *crushed* him?”

“Something, more likely. Those are the kinds of injuries we see in victims of building collapse, or who’ve been pinned by a vehicle—something heavy, anyway.”

“Jesus. How was he walking?”

“He was *walking*?”

“Before he passed out, he and I—we had a... a disagreement. Jesus,” he says again, mostly to himself, “what a mess.”

“That was the official consensus among those treating him, too. I’d say it’s miraculous he made it in at all, and I haven’t even gotten to the worst part yet.”

“How can this possibly get *worse*?”

She raises an eyebrow at him, then looks back at her chart.

“For all the damage to his body,” she says, “I was surprised he doesn’t have a concussion. No brain damage whatsoever, despite the contusions to his head.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” says Tony. “He was out cold when I brought him in, I thought—”

“That was my thinking as well,” she says, “until our blood tests got back, and I saw that his albumin levels are at one point eight.”

“You’re gonna have to translate that for me, doc.”

“It’s one of the quicker tests for malnutrition,” she says. “In layman terms, he’s starving. And dehydrated. And, more than likely, extremely exhausted, which is why he was unconscious when

you brought him in. The mind can do amazing things to push the body through pain, but only for so long. I think he got somewhere safe and his brain switched into shutdown mode.”

If the passenger seat of Tony’s car twenty minutes after the man himself threatened to send the kid to the highest-security prison known to man counts as *somewhere safe*, he doesn’t want to imagine the conditions Peter’s been living in. And yet his mind goes there anyway.

“But you’re fixing him,” he says.

“Working on it. Our obvious priority was the internal bleeding, so we put him under to start making repairs... but about twenty minutes in, he started to wake up. The kid burns through anaesthetic like it’s going out of style, Mr. Stark, and after two more rounds of trying to keep him under, we closed him up.”

“Without fixing the bleeding?”

“Well, that’s the remarkable part. Because as soon as we got a couple of banana bags in him, Peter started healing on his own. I think the malnutrition and exhaustion was inhibiting whatever healing ability he normally has, because I’ve never seen anything like it—wounds knitting closed right before my eyes.”

Tony has seen something like it. He’s seen Steve do it maybe a hundred times, feeling both the burn of envy and the cool of relief, knowing his friend will always be better than him in this way, and also that he would have been dead a hundred times over without it.

Apparently the same can be said for Peter. Tony makes a mental note to finally look into how the kid got his powers, but to the doctor he simply nods, *Go on*.

“So for now we’re monitoring, but I think once he’s had some sleep and some nutrition he’ll more or less heal on his own. I’m actually more worried about getting food in him. Ironically, I think his healing and advanced metabolism might put him at a higher risk for refeeding syndrome—basically, the body tries to digest nutrients too quickly, and the digestive chemicals turn toxic. We’ll have to go slow with the food over the next couple of days, and I’d like to keep him at least that long.”

It takes Tony just a beat too long to realize that Dr. Brainerd isn’t *stating*, she’s *asking*. Asking him if this timeline is alright. Because Peter is his responsibility now.

“What happens if we transfer him before then?” he says. “Don’t get me wrong, you’ve done an amazing job, but most of the time I have people who are more... specialized in this area.”

Dr. Brainerd looks like she was expecting this.

“I’d like twenty-four hours at least,” she says. “I suspect he’ll be asleep at least that long. We can reassess when he’s awake.”

“Can I—am I allowed to see him?”

She raises her eyebrows.

“You’re his legal guardian, Mr. Stark,” she says. “His parent, for all intents and purposes. You can stay with him all night, if you want.”

Tony nods and hopes the panic he feels at the word *parent* doesn’t show on his face. Something must, though, because she says,

“Do you know where he was before tonight?”

Now he’s sure the shame must show. He can’t hold it back any longer.

“Homeless, I think,” he says. “I don’t know where he was staying.”

She nods slowly.

“Mr. Stark,” she says, “the only reason I didn’t call CPS—and, hell, the cops, the whole brigade—is because of what you told me out on the ambulance bay. If he were any other kid, I would say this is one of the most severe cases of neglect I’ve ever seen, and I did my residency in rural Arizona in the nineties. And even if there wasn’t someone specifically facilitating the neglect” —*There was*, thinks Tony, *it was me*— “the effect is going to be the same, psychologically. You don’t just get over that kind of thing, and I want to make sure... I guess I just hope you know what you’re getting into.”

Tony can’t think of anything to say to this.

The lights are off in Peter’s room, shrouding everything in shadow. Public hospital rooms are smaller than Tony remembers—he’s so used to the facility upstate—but at least it’s a single. And there are even a couple of recliners next to the bed, one of which Dr. Brainerd points him to as they step inside. But Tony doesn’t take it, at least not right away. He stops just beyond the doorway, eyes fixed on the form in the bed. Peter is barely visible in the low emergency lights and what little light from the city filters in through the small window, but even so he looks smaller than Tony could have imagined, curled on his side under a thin pink blanket and playing host to so many tubes that Tony thinks of a baby in the womb before he can stop himself—Peter just looks so fragile, so dependent.

“We have him on a pretty high dose of morphine,” says Dr. Brainerd, pointing to the IV, “as well as a cocktail of antibiotics. When he wakes up I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s disoriented and more than a little nauseous. But that’s just to warn you. Like I said, I’ll be surprised if he’s fully conscious before tomorrow night. Are you going to stay with him?”

Tony nods absently, still trying to reconcile this pale, thin, unconscious adolescent with the superhero he once saw take down a fifty-foot-tall man almost single-handedly.

Dr. Brainerd appears to hesitate, as though she’s about to offer to stay, but in the end she just sighs and exits, leaving Tony alone with Peter.

When he finally lowers himself into the chair by Peter’s bed he does so slowly, as though Peter will realize he is there and try to flee, like he did in the warehouse. But Peter doesn’t so much as twitch. In fact, the only sign he’s even alive is the oxygen mask over his face, which is fogging and then clearing in time with Peter’s breath. The bruises on his forehead have faded to a dusky blue, and the cut on his lip is nearly gone, but this is the smallest of consolations. The word *neglect* keeps screaming through Tony’s head like a speeding car that’s lost its brakes.

“What am I going to do with you, kid?” he murmurs.

The kid does not reply.

Tony checks his watch and sees that it's closer to morning than it is to night. He hasn't slept at all, but even now, with evidence of the kid's aliveness—if not, yet, his okayness—right in front of him, he finds he has almost no inclination to try. Instead he pulls out his phone and checks the news for the thousandth time since he arrived at the hospital. The press got wind of Westcott's arrest some time after Tony's lawyers arrived—it's still dominating the headlines, along with plenty of scathing speculation about Spider-Man's part in that arrest. Miraculously, however, there has been no mention of Tony's part, nor of the fact that he has spent the better part of the night lurking in the emergency room of a public hospital in Midtown. Tony expects it's coming, but he's relieved to have at least a night. Not just for him—for Peter as well. The only thing that pops up when he searches Peter's name is the months-old missing person report, complete with the CPS photo taken the night Peter's uncle died.

A week ago, Tony looked at this photo and saw the affirmation of everything that was written in the kid's file: a sullen glare, unkempt hair, a dirty shirt—everything about him a testament to delinquency and defiance. Now Tony looks at it and can't believe how thoroughly he let his own bias color his interpretation, nor how wrong that interpretation was. The kid's glare isn't sullen, nor is it even a glare: he's eyeing the camera with the same wary uncertainty with which he regarded Tony in the warehouse earlier. His hair isn't unkempt—or, okay, it is, but it's unkempt in the way of every thirteen-year-old kid who insists on grooming and styling themselves for the first time, that first venture into teenage selfhood that so often goes awry. And the stains... Tony doesn't know how he didn't realize it before, but those stains are not the residue of a careless, lawless lifestyle. They are bloodstains. Because the kid wasn't just *there* when his uncle died, he was standing right next to him when he got shot in the chest.

But what about the after? What about the reports that the kid is a delinquent, an assaulter, an all-around bad egg? Because looking at him now—and, hell, knowing Spider-Man's actions firsthand, which might be reckless and foolhardy but, as far as he can tell, have never intentionally harmed anyone—Tony just can't imagine that Peter would have pushed some old woman, or tried to shank a kid. In fact the notion is so out of step as to seem utterly bizarre.

It's not the only question that will go unanswered tonight.

Tony scrubs a hand over his face and closes the picture. He glances up at the real Peter, whose over-long hair is falling gently across his face. He's going to need a haircut, Tony thinks, and then he realizes *he* is the one responsible for making sure the kid gets that haircut. His legal guardian. In every sense of the term.

Tony pulls up his contacts list and starts scrolling through, trying to find the number for the girl who does his hair. She's new and he can't remember her name, something with an M or maybe a T, and usually he would have an assistant take care of this but somehow the thought of calling a third party in on what is effectively his first job as the kid's caretaker seems wrong, as does simply asking FRIDAY to do it, so Tony sits there, scrolling and scrolling until he finally thinks, *What the hell am I doing?* and sets the phone down on the bedside table so hard it would probably crack if that were the sort of thing StarkPhones did.

At the sound of the phone hitting the formica, Peter stirs. His face crumples—eyebrows drawing together, corners of his mouth turning downward—and then his eyelids start to flutter.

Tony leans forward, holding his breath. There's no way the kid is actually awake. Forget twenty-four hours; he was in surgery less than two hours ago, and Dr. Brainerd just told Tony that she has the kid on a hodge-podge of meds that should buy him at *least* until morning before he has to start dealing with whatever this thing has turned into.

But, as usual, Peter defies all expectation. He blinks hard twice, and then his eyes open fully. They are hazy and unfocused and when they swivel around the room he practically goes cross-eyed with the effort, but then they come to rest, unmistakably, on Tony.

“Ben?”

Even though Peter’s voice is barely a whisper, and muffled by the oxygen mask, Tony can still make out the single word, breathed out with the kind of ease that can only mean Peter has not yet realized where he is, or how he got there.

Tony swallows.

“Nope,” he says. “It’s just me.”

“Do you have my glasses?” Peter whispers.

“Your—what, kid?”

Peter’s eyes widen.

“The kids,” he rasps, and then to Tony’s horror he tries to sit up. “The kids! We have to—!”

Tony knows if he pushes the kid back into the bed he risks setting him off further, so instead he reaches for his recently-discarded phone. Happy sent him a picture when he retrieved the kids a few hours ago; Tony rushes to pull the photo up, sticking it under Peter’s nose just as he is lurching upright.

“They’re fine,” he says. “They’re fine, look.”

Peter, gasping, falls back on his pillow and blinks at the phone.

“They’re—they’re—”

“With Happy. He’s taking them to the Hamptons, he has a friend there who’s going to look after them while we get this sorted. They’re safe, Peter. You saved them.”

But rather than looking relieved, Peter’s face crumples. He squeezes his eyes shut as tears leak from the corners, choking back sobs.

“It’s my fault,” he moans. “My fault. Shouldn’t’ve... shouldn’t... I left them. I—”

“Hey. Hey, stop. The kids are fine. And even if they weren’t that wouldn’t be your fault okay? None of this is your fault.”

Peter sucks in a shuddering breath and shakes his head.

“Everyone,” he whispers. “Not just them. Everyone. Felipe. Ned. Ben. I...”

“*Kid*,” says Tony, more insistent now. “You can’t carry the whole world on your shoulders. I’ve tried it, I can guarantee it won’t work. You did good tonight. You did fucking great. You saved everyone you needed to save and then some. Just... worry about yourself for once, okay?”

Peter shakes his head again, weakly.

“I wanna go home,” he whispers.

And then his face relaxes. His breathing evens. He's out again.

Tony watches Peter's chest rise and fall five times before he's certain the kid isn't going to wake up again, and then he snatches his phone back up and exits the room. In the dim fluorescent light of the hallway, he dials into FRIDAY's system.

"Good news, boss?" she says softly.

"About as good as you would expect. He's been beaten half to death and is, apparently, starving, but he's alive, so..."

Just saying it causes a swell of frustration. If it weren't for fear he'll wake Peter again, he would very much like to punch a wall. Or himself. Instead, he clenches his fist at his side and takes a calming breath.

"Who's at the main lab upstate right now?" he says. "Anyone?"

"Just a few of the bots. Boss, you know this isn't—"

"Don't tell me it isn't my fault!" Tony snaps. "Just—don't, okay? There are a million different ways I could have known what was going on, and the only reason I didn't was because I was too preoccupied with my own garbage to look closely for one second. And one of those ways is sitting in a paper bag under my main workbench, so please don't try to argue with me right now, okay? Just... have DUM-E grab Spider-Man's—Peter's—suit and plug it into the mainframe. Send me all of the footage from the security protocols."

"That's a lot of footage, boss."

"Yeah, well, there was a lot to miss apparently. Don't skimp. Send it all."

The Amazing Peter Parker

While FRIDAY wrangles the bots and initiates the transfer of all the Baby Monitor footage, Tony paces the hall for a while, then returns to Peter's room—which feels like a violation somehow, but it's the only choice he's got: he's bound to get recognized if he keeps wandering the hospital like a sleep-deprived zombie. He resumes his vigil in the chair next to the kid's bed, and thankfully this time Peter doesn't wake. He's almost unnervingly still in sleep now, even when the nurse shuffles in to check his IV and take his temperature, casting furtive glances at Tony all the while.

When she is gone, Tony finally falls into a restless half-sleep. His dreams are populated by shapes and shadows, none of which he can identify, but which leave him covered in a cold sweat nonetheless. When he wakes with a start some indeterminate amount of time later, he can still see them looming in the corners of his vision for a moment before they disappear.

It's morning, finally. Tony knows this because there is sunlight streaming through the small hospital room window. Besides this significant change, the scene remains nearly the same. Peter is still curled on his side, still asleep, though someone has removed the oxygen mask. Daylight gives Tony the first good look he's had since they left the abandoned building last night, but it's not a welcome clarity: though the more minor of the cuts and bruises are completely gone—and the middling ones, the ones that weren't quite deep enough to warrant bandages, are catching up—the light brings out the dark circles under Peter's eyes, the slight sunkenness of his cheeks. The things that will take a lot longer than a night to heal.

Tony reaches automatically for his phone. He has fifty-two missed messages.

Happy

Happy

Hill

Happy

Rhodey

Happy

Pepper

Pepper

Pepper

And so on.

He ignores the urge that tells him to call his friends, sends a silent thanks to FRIDAY for fielding his other calls—no doubt there would be about a hundred more messages from the shareholders and his lawyers and Ross if she hadn't had the good sense to block them—and dials Hill first.

"We've got him," she says without preamble, while Tony unsticks his aching body from the pleather armchair and heads into the bathroom, so as not to wake Peter. "Charges were filed this morning. He'll probably make bail, just to warn you, but for now they're holding him."

Tony leans against the sink so he doesn't slide to the floor with relief.

"How?"

Maria gives him the broad strokes. She's been busy while Tony has been asleep, first breaking into CPS's files—illegal, inadmissible, but Tony, having done the same thing just a few weeks ago, isn't about to hold it against her—then using those files to track down several of Westcott's former foster children. One of them talked. Maria is confident she can get the others to as well.

"One of the detectives here is former SHIELD," she says. "He's giving me PI status, so I'm in while they investigate."

"Pepper isn't gonna be happy with me about that," says Tony. "You're the best private security she's ever had."

"It's temporary. Very temporary, hopefully. I want to sink this guy quick. Anyway, I'm told you still have some sway at Stark Industries. Maybe you can write me a note."

Tony makes a sound that might have been a laugh if it hadn't gotten stuck halfway in his throat.

"I don't know how to repay you, Maria," he says.

Maria doesn't reply for a moment. It's a silence that seems to swell with the events of the last six months the longer it drags on.

"Just to clarify," she says at last, "I'd do this no matter what. What that kid told me last night..." She takes a deep breath. "I'm not asking this as a bribe, or repayment. But I'd probably kick myself if I didn't ask at all. Clint's hearing is coming up. They're deciding whether to put him on house arrest or—"

"I know," Tony says. He does. He's been following the case since the beginning. "I've been submitting character testaments since July. I'll send a dozen more, if you want."

There is another long, long silence, during which Tony desperately wishes he could see Maria's face.

"I'm sorry this happened, Tony," she says.

He doesn't know if she's talking about the Accords or Westcott. He decides it doesn't matter.

"I'm sorry, too."

It is the first in a long string of apologies for the days to come. It is not, however, a painful one. It lifts just a small amount of the unbearable weight of these last months. It makes Tony just a little

lighter.

He calls Happy next.

“They’re settled,” he says, when Tony inquires after Peter’s foster siblings. “One of the twins isn’t a happy camper—I had no idea what to tell her about her dad, and she wouldn’t stop asking—but they all fell asleep eventually. I’ll keep you updated.”

“You’re officially forgiven for blowing up my plane, Hogan.”

“Technically that wasn’t me. But I’ll take what I can get.” Happy pauses. “How’s the kid?”

“Not great. Really not great. But still unconscious, at least. My one bit of good luck since... I don’t know. Since two thousand ten, probably. Look, you’re gonna find out eventually, Hap. The kid is —”

“I know,” Happy interrupts, sounding just as miserable and guilty as Tony has felt for the past twelve hours. “The wonder twins explained last night. The older wonder twins, I mean. The ones who were hiding the kids. Speaking of, I, uh, may have made a rash call in the heat of the moment. The wonder twins have my number and they are... persistent. They’re threatening to track you down, and they’re showing a scary amount of follow-through. My firewall caught the boy one trying to hack my location, and the girl is, uh... frightening. Normally I’d be all for pulling the adult card, but I kinda think we might owe them one. At least an explanation.”

“Tell them the truth,” says Tony immediately. He’s done with secrets, at least right now. “And give them my number. I’ll let them know when he’s awake.”

“Okay. Thanks boss. Uh—what is the truth, exactly?”

Tony doesn’t know if he has the fortitude to recount the story right now. So instead he says, “Are you back in the city?”

“Yeah. I’m heading back to Coney Island to supervise the cleanup crew.”

“Delegate it. I need you to go to my apartment instead.”

“O-kay,” says Happy slowly. “What—”

“Sorry, Hap,” says Tony. “I know turndown service is a little beneath your paygrade. But I need to lay low on this one for as long as I can. I need you to get the second bedroom ready. And maybe some groceries. And—anything else you can think of that a fifteen-year-old kid might need. Or like. Or—just, whatever you can think of.”

“Tony...”

“I know,” says Tony. “I’m... working it out as I go, okay?”

Happy sounds... not doubtful, exactly. Fearful, maybe. But all he says is, “Whatever you need, boss.”

“Thank you,” says Tony. “And—for the record, Happy? I should probably start listening to you

more often.”

“Not quite two toddlers stacked on top of each other,” says Happy, almost gently.

“Not much better, though.”

“Like I said, I’ll take what I can get.”

“Thanks, Happy.”

This is apology number two.

Apology number three is more unexpected, but just as necessary. This necessity comes in the form of Peter’s AI, Karen.

The download finished a while ago, but Tony doesn’t open it right away as he heads back into Peter’s room and resumes his seat next to the bed—the bathroom is too cramped, and the kid is still motionless: he figures he’s okay as long as he’s quiet. First he shoots a quick text to Rhodey—of the *I’m fine, rest up, I’ll explain later* variety—because Rhodey is still in physical therapy, still adjusting to his new legs, and Tony knows if he doesn’t say something the man will probably haul himself to New York completely unnecessarily. After it sends, Tony hovers over Pepper’s number for a long time. But in the end he doesn’t press it. He opens the news instead.

It’s not pleasant.

They’ve gotten wind of the charges against Westcott—no surprise there. It is surprising—and more than a little sickening—that the charges seem to mean less than shit as far as the papers are concerned.

WHERE IS SPIDER-MAN HIDING?

And why is Tony Stark encouraging criminal behavior among his allies?

It would be bad enough if it were *The Daily Bugle*. But it’s not. It’s the *Washington Post*, and the article is accompanied by a grainy still-capture photo of the security footage taken outside Westcott’s apartment building: Spider-Man, masked, carrying one kid and leading the other two away, glancing over his shoulder guiltily as he does.

Regardless of the charges—which popped up rather conveniently as soon as it became clear Spider-Man was involved—isn’t Westcott innocent until proven guilty? Since when did it become acceptable practice to allow superheroes to assault civilians and kidnap children as a response to the mere accusation of misconduct? Wasn’t this the exact sort of thing the Accords were meant to prevent? And if so, then where is Tony Stark in all of this? Why hasn’t he commented on the bad behavior of *his* recruit—or better yet, volunteered to help bring him in?

Such is the refrain of every major news outlet this morning. The only small, small bright spot is that Peter’s name has still remained out of it—but with every reporter in the world digging into Westcott’s past, it’s only a matter of time before someone digs up the runaway, the one black mark on Westcott’s record. From there it won’t be long before they make the connection back to Spider-Man, like Margaret Esposito did.

Stomach churning in spite of its emptiness, Tony closes the news and pulls up the Baby Monitor footage.

“Am I linked into Karen?” he murmurs; he’s using his comm link as headphones.

“I’ve got her streaming,” FRIDAY replies. “Fair warning, boss: I don’t think she’s a fan.”

“You shouldn’t have turned off my outgoings,” says Karen the moment FRIDAY connects them. “That was a really bad idea.”

He designed Karen with the Spider-Man he saw in Germany in mind: friendly, chatty, with just the tiniest amount of tongue-in-cheek ridiculousness to match the kid’s. He thinks this will be reflected in her response. Unfortunately—for Tony, anyway—he also gave Karen the same ability he has given every other AI since he perfected JARVIS years ago: the ability to learn, and to become, for lack of a better word, attached to his or her user. Karen has become attached. Karen has learned.

Karen is pissed.

“You’re more correct than you could possibly know,” says Tony, “and I’m sorrier than I thought it was possible to be. But I need your help now. You know him better than I do; I need to know where he’s been, who’s been helping him.”

“I was helping him,” says Karen.

The sharp guilt that has been present since last night suddenly explodes just behind his left-side breastbone. For a second it feels just like shrapnel, and Tony has to work on his breathing to keep himself present.

If you’re nothing without this suit—

“I know,” he says. “I know. But I want to help him now. I *will* help him now. I just... I need you to help me first. The relevant stuff. That’s all I’m asking.”

Karen appears to hesitate. But only for a second.

She pulls up the protocol.

If Peter’s messages were the Spider-Man podcast, the Baby Monitor footage is the behind-the-scenes. The b-roll. The making-of.

It’s not nearly as heartwarming as the edited version.

The crime fighting is all there. This part, at least, is fine. It takes on a new edge, of course—a painful, guilt-ridden edge—in light of the fact that the kid doing that crime fighting is not-yet-fifteen in most of the footage, but at least it’s on-par with Peter’s daily reports. It’s on-par, too, with who Tony thought Spider-Man was after that first battle on the tarmac in Germany. When the kid is on patrol he chatters non-stop—to himself, to the AI in his suit, to the *criminals*, even. He’s clever. He’s funny. He catches both the people he is fighting and Tony, watching, off guard with his wit as often as he does with his fists. It’s clear that Peter is in his element when he’s Spider-Man—almost as though everything that was happening around his daily patrols just disappeared the second he put on the suit.

He wonders, just for a moment, why Karen chose this part to show first, but then he realizes: she wants Tony to understand. Not just what’s happened to Peter—she wants him to understand who he is.

It's a choice Tony becomes increasingly grateful for when Karen rolls into the next clip.

It's dusk in the video—Tony can see the haze of late sunlight over the river as Peter walks across cracked asphalt, between what appears to be several abandoned buildings. He only gets a glimpse before Peter clambers up the wall of one of these buildings and through a second-story window.

The room Peter enters is dark, but only for a second: the suit's visual feeds are designed to amplify any refracted light, so after just a second the scene resolves into clarity. Peter is standing in a musty room that looks like it might have, long ago, been an office. There is a dilapidated desk in one corner and some lopsided file cabinets in another. It's these cabinets that Peter heads toward now, yanking the bottom drawer open and rifling around inside for a moment before extracting a small stack of crumpled bills. He counts them quickly, murmuring numbers to himself, then stuffs the money away, going for a different drawer. This one is full of junk food—cookies, chips, those protein bars that claim to be healthy but are really just sugar—and Tony finds himself, inexplicably, holding his breath as the kid sifts through the pile and pulls out a package of gummy worms. Peter turns the package over in his hands a few times, appearing to consider it. Then he puts it back, and closes the drawer.

"You really should eat something, Peter."

Karen's voice makes Tony jump; he almost drops his phone. He glances up automatically, but real-life Peter is still asleep.

Past-Peter, on the other hand, replies.

"It's all good, K. Big lunch."

"I feel like I should point out that I watched you eat lunch."

"I feel like *I* should point out that statement has a major stalker vibe."

"I don't know if I can help that, Peter. You are technically wearing me."

"Aaaand now we're sliding into serial killer territory. Wait, does that make you the serial killer, or me?"

Tony knows what the kid is doing—deflecting. He's good at it, but not good enough: Tony wants to reach through the screen and grab those skinny shoulders, force him back toward that rusty file cabinet. But he can't.

Karen wasn't fooled either. Otherwise she wouldn't be showing Tony this now. But she is almost as powerless as he is: as Peter starts walking toward the desk, he pulls the mask off, and the feed goes blank.

Karen rolls into the next clip.

It is, all in all, a terrible way to pass a morning. There's more footage than Tony could hope to get through in a month, much less one sitting, but he still finds himself determined to try—because the deeper he gets, the more obvious it becomes that he majorly, majorly fucked this one up. Worse even than he thought last night.

Why didn't he see it? Why didn't he notice how skinny the kid was, or how tired he seemed every time they ran into each other after Germany? Why didn't he even stop to consider that the kid was calling and texting as frequently as he did not just because he wanted Tony's approval, but because he was desperately, utterly alone?

(It might be the worst part of the footage, this realization: besides Karen, there is no one Peter talks to on a regular basis, at least not when he's wearing the mask. Not until the last couple of weeks, when a round-faced kid named Ned—whom Tony can only assume is one of the wonder twins—starts making an occasional appearance. Tony makes a mental note to get Ned a full ride to the school of his choice once everything else is taken care of. And maybe a Lamborghini. Though it will do nothing to undo the damage he, Tony, has already done.)

Somebody has to have invented time travel at this point, right?

“Karen,” Tony croaks, pausing the playback after a particularly brutal clip, wherein Peter repeatedly blamed himself for his uncle’s death—recorded, horribly, the morning after Tony told him to stay away from *the Parker kid*. “Do you know what happened to him after his uncle died? Before me, I mean. Did he ever say?”

Real-time Karen pauses again.

“I can show you,” she says, “if you ask me to. But I think Peter deserves to—”

Before she can finish, a nurse bustles in, pushing a small cart. Tony shuts the feed off automatically: the staff on this floor were all given NDAs courtesy of Tony’s lawyers last night, but only Dr. Brainerd knows all of the details—to everyone else, Peter is just a lucky—or unlucky, depending on their opinion of Tony—kid who caught Tony Stark’s attention. If they suspect any of the rest of it, with Westcott or Spider-Man, no one has said.

Still, Tony isn’t exactly trying to encourage speculation. He tucks his phone away.

“I just have to draw some blood,” she says. “I’ll be quick.”

She is quick. Quick and efficient—the picture of professionalism.

But she still manages to wake Peter up.

He starts to stir just as she slides the needle out. Just like last night, his brow draws together, his breathing coming a little quicker. The nurse glances at Tony, who nods, though his own breathing has just quickened ever-so-slightly, and, quietly, she exits the room.

A moment later, Peter opens his eyes.

Again, it takes them a moment to focus. But this time, when he does, his eyes don’t go wide. He doesn’t whisper his dead uncle’s name, or try to shoot out of the bed. He just looks around once, quick and deliberating, and then locks onto Tony.

Peter’s shoulders draw up almost imperceptibly. Tony might not have even noticed it if it wasn’t accompanied by a small spike in the kid’s heart rate on the monitor. And even though he wants to lean forward, Tony forces himself to lean back. To affect an easy, relaxed pose. One that says, *There’s no danger here*.

It’s an effort.

“You with us?” he says.

Peter gives a minuscule nod. His cheeks flush a very faint pink.

He tries to sit up.

“Hey. No. Just—your healing is doing you lots of favors right now, kid, but you still have about four hundred broken bones that need some time get unbroken. Take it easy. You don’t have anywhere to be.”

Slowly, reluctantly, Peter lowers himself back down.

“I don’t even think I have that many bones.” His voice is so hoarse it must be painful to speak, but if it is he doesn’t mention it. He hesitates. “You’re still here.”

“I don’t have anywhere to be, either.”

The faint pink in Peter’s cheeks rises slightly. Tony curses himself inwardly. *Now is not the time to be pithy, jackass.* He clears his throat.

“Are you—how are you feeling?”

“I’m okay,” Peter croaks, obviously lying—though he’s still on a truckload of painkillers, so it’s not as bad as it could be, hopefully.

“Do you um—you were a little out of it last night. Do you—?”

“We talked,” Peter says. “The kids?”

“Still fine. I spoke to Happy earlier.”

“Did—did anyone see—?”

“No. Just your doctor. But she’s not gonna tell. No one else knows. Besides, you know. Me.”

Tony braces himself for more of what he saw last night—apologies, explanations—but Peter only nods slightly and looks down. Almost as though he’s ashamed.

Tony clears his throat again.

“Are you up for talking? Just for a minute?”

He knows it’s not the time. The kid is still supposed to be asleep—for another twelve hours, at least—but he can’t get that footage out of his head. He can’t stop the questions that are rolling around in his brain like boulders in a landslide.

He needs to know.

And Peter, ever obliging, nods. He tries once again to prop himself up on his elbows. Rather than fight it this time, Tony just sighs and leans forward to raise the head of the bed so Peter is in a half-sitting position. He can tell from the way the kid glances at the controls as Tony withdraws that he’d like to sit up further, but Tony is doubtful even about the compromise: Peter still looks like he might blow away on a stiff breeze.

“Okay,” says Tony, “so. About last night. About—ah, about everything, I guess. I should start with—and just stop me at any point if this is too much, or—”

“Mr. Stark?” says Peter. “I took down an airborne plane from the outside last night. I can handle a conversation.”

The soft, almost apologetic tone of Peter’s voice is in such contrast to what he’s said it takes Tony a moment to understand it. When he does he huffs a laugh, incredulous, and shakes his head.

“The Incredible Spider-Man, huh?”

Peter smiles. It’s tentative, looks like it takes an effort, but Tony knows right away he wants to see more of it.

“I don’t think my friend Ned will let me have that one. He’s kind of obsessed with the Hulk.”

“Don’t tell Bruce if you ever meet him, but so am I. Okay, so not Incredible. How about Amazing?”

The smile widens just a little bit. Then disappears as Peter looks down at his lap.

“You want me to talk about Skip, don’t you?”

Tony shakes his head. “No. I mean, you can if you want to, but that’s actually what I wanted to tell you. You remember my friend from last night? She arrested him after you passed out.”

“Yeah,” says Peter. “But she said she needed evidence, and I—”

“We got it, kid. Or, we got enough anyway. The District Attorney formally charged him this morning. He’s in jail, Peter.”

Peter looks up, brow furrowed.

“You—how? I never told anyone. Just—just you. Even the girls didn’t know.”

“Hill—Maria—had a hunch when she looked into his records with CPS. She started tracking down his former foster kids, managed to get in touch with one of them—DeMarcus Smith? He’s a sophomore at CUNY... anyway. He gave us enough to make the charges stick, and she’s still talking to the others, but it looks like we’ll have enough testimony to take him to trial, maybe even without dragging you into it.”

Tony is hoping for some expression of relief, but Peter’s face is leaning toward the opposite: he looks mortified.

“He did this to all of them?”

Tony’s effort to keep his own face neutral as he nods is enormous.

Peter draws his knees to his chest, buries his face in them, and drags his hands through his hair.

“I’m such an idiot,” he says. “I’m such an idiot, I can’t believe—when he said I was the only one I—and I just *left*, I didn’t even—didn’t even try—”

“Stop.”

Tony’s voice comes out perhaps harsher than he intended, but it has the desired effect: Peter stops talking and looks up, startled.

“Sorry, kid, but no way. There is no way in hell or on Earth or Asgard or wherever in the universe you and I might end up I am going to let you sit there and take the blame for what that monster did to you or anyone else, do you understand me?”

“But I—”

“No. No. Just—” Tony sighs. It’s his turn to run his hands through his hair. “Look. Kid. You have

every right in the world to never listen to another word I say, ever. And if you decide you'd rather gouge out your own eardrums than ever take another word of bad advice from a clueless, ignorant adult again—well, I probably won't let you do that, but I will shut my fat mouth for once in my life, and that is not a promise I make lightly. Or ever. But Peter. You have to listen to this, and you have to believe me: none of what he did—not one single goddamn second of it—was your fault. You read me?"

Peter doesn't nod. He doesn't do anything for a moment, in fact, just stares at Tony with eyes that still seem too big for his head, frowning slightly, like he is trying to work through a riddle. But when he opens his mouth again it's not to object.

"What about... what about the new kid? The one from last night?"

Tony shakes his head.

"He said he had... a weird feeling about Westcott, but that's it. He never... it never got that far."

Peter's shoulders sag slightly. Relief.

"So... he's in jail?"

"Yes."

"And the kids—?"

"Are never going anywhere near him again. No kid is. I promise."

Peter, brow still furrowed, breathes a short sigh. It doesn't look like it's sunk in yet. Tony can't say he's surprised. Justice might be the very thing Spider-Man metes out, but Peter Parker hasn't seen an ounce of it before today.

"Peter?"

Peter returns his gaze to Tony.

"You... we don't have to talk about this now if you don't want. Your doctor is probably already going to kill me for the fact that you're awake at all... but there are just a few things I don't understand."

"About Skip?"

"About you, kid. I was clearly operating off some bad information last night, and I wanna know how it got there. 'Cuz the Amazing Spider-Man doesn't seem the type to do the sorts of things that file described. And neither does Peter Parker. *Especially* not Peter Parker."

Peter closes his eyes, draws his knees a little tighter to his chest.

"Maybe I'm not as good a person as you think I am."

"Well I'll be honest, I've got you on one hell of a pedestal after what you did last night. But there's not much you could say to knock yourself off it. You're a hero, kid. You're not changing my mind on that."

Peter opens his eyes. Now they are shining, though the rest of his face remains frustratingly difficult to read.

"I don't want to get anyone in trouble," he says.

"I'm not looking to blame anyone. I just want the truth."

"What do you want to know?"

"I mean... all of it. I'm honestly pretty baffled. CPS seems to think you're the Don Corleone of the foster system, but I'm having trouble seeing how anyone who's met you could possibly have that impression."

"Maybe I'm not as nice as I look."

"So you did push an old lady down a flight of stairs?"

The heart rate monitor spikes—not a lot, but enough Tony considers withdrawing the question and telling the kid to just sleep—but before he can do so, Peter answers.

"There weren't any stairs. It was—we were in the doorway. The only stairs in that house went to the basement and that was where I—just, there weren't any stairs. She lied about that part."

"Any idea why?"

Peter shrugs his uninjured shoulder.

"They didn't like me very much. I never knew why they took me in the first place, all they ever did was complain about how much I cost to feed."

Great. The very first place the kid went after losing his uncle made him feel like a burden. No wonder he's so tentative: Tony remembers how he balked in the hotel room in Germany and feels a renewed slice of empathetic pain in his chest, but he doesn't let it show.

"But you did push her?"

"Yeah. I did. But it wasn't... it wasn't like she said in her report, I was just..." He sighs again, frustrated. "It's gonna sound like I'm making excuses."

"It doesn't sound like that. I want to know."

"They were mad at me. I got home late, or—I guess they thought I'd made them look stupid because my social worker came to visit and I wasn't there, so when I got home they started yelling and—"

Peter bites his tongue.

Even though Tony's own mouth has gone dry, he says, "They hit you?"

Peter nods. "First she just grabbed me, but when she started... she never hit me that hard, usually, but this time I was... I dunno, I guess I started to freak out a little. I was angry. And when she slapped me I started having an asthma attack. I wasn't trying to hurt her or anything, I just kept trying to tell her I needed my inhaler and she wouldn't let me, she kept yelling, saying I was ungrateful... and she had me backed into a corner, so I pushed her. Not to hurt her. Just so I could get past her. I know I shouldn't have. It wasn't... wasn't a good way to handle things, I just wasn't thinking straight and—"

"And you couldn't breathe," says Tony.

Peter nods.

“So you were defending yourself.”

Something flickers in the kid’s expression, then disappears. This time he doesn’t respond at all, not even to nod.

“Why didn’t any of that make it into the report?”

Peter shrugs again.

“They never really asked my side of things. She called the cops and I got arrested and when they realized how expensive it would be to press charges they just... signed me back over. And CPS took me to the halfway house.”

As though they were returning a pair of shoes, Tony thinks bitterly.

“Okay,” he says. “What about the halfway house? The knife? Were you—was that self defense too?”

Slowly, Peter shakes his head. Tony waits. But Peter doesn’t elaborate. Just watches Tony with the same quiet, impenetrable look. Tony has the sense that he is withdrawing and feels a brief surge of something like panic: he doesn’t want to let the kid slip away, not when he’s just starting to offer the first real hints at the truth Tony’s had since he met him.

So Tony presses. Just a little. Because he has to know.

“Big pedestal, remember, kid? Whatever happened, I’m not going to judge you for it.”

Peter lets out a tiny puff of air and looks away, out the window.

“Everyone judges,” he says. “It’s just what people do.”

Tony flinches.

“I’m the one you should be judging, kid.”

The corners of Peter’s mouth twitch into a frown, but he doesn’t look away from the window.

“Peter. You have every right to not trust me. I looked at that file and I saw what I wanted to see. And worse than that, I *didn’t* look at anything else. You never should have been on your own as long as you were. But I want to make it up to you now. Whatever you say, I’ll believe it. I promise.”

“I don’t want to get anyone in trouble,” Peter mumbles again.

“No trouble. No telling. Anything you tell me here, it never makes it past this room.” Tony raises three fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

Now Peter brings his gaze around. The corners of his mouth twitch again, but this time it looks more like a smile.

“Were you really a Boy Scout?”

“Since we’re telling the truth? Yes. But only for about a week before they kicked me out for blowing stuff up, and only because my dad forced me into it. And if that information ever makes

its way into Steve Rogers' hands, I'll know exactly who to hunt down."

Steve's name slips out so casually Tony doesn't realize it until it's done. His throat constricts, but not for long: Peter smiles for real now.

"Are there pictures?"

"This room is Vegas right now, right?"

Peter holds up three fingers of his own.

"Yes. And as recompense for my many mistakes since we met, I might even let you see them. But first..."

Peter slowly lowers his hand.

"The halfway house?"

"If you're up for it, I'd really like to know."

The gloom settles back in Peter's expression like a sudden fog.

"It... it wasn't really my knife."

"I kinda figured. Whose was it?"

"My friend Felipe. It wasn't his fault, though."

He glances at Tony sharply, as if expecting contradiction. But Tony merely nods, *Go on*.

Peter bites his lip.

"Have you ever been hungry, Mr. Stark? Not like a little hungry, I mean, or like you need a snack. Like... really, really hungry?"

In an ironic twist, Tony's stomach suddenly feels too small to hold any amount of food. He feels, in fact, like he never wants to eat again. Because no: he has never been really, really hungry. Even in Afghanistan they fed them. It was slop, granted, but it was edible—they'd needed him cogent enough to build bombs, after all.

He shakes his head.

Peter nods. Matter-of-factly, almost. The gesture looks far, far too old for someone as young as he is

"It makes it hard to think," says Peter. "It makes it really hard to think... to think clearly. To think at all, I guess. Felipe isn't a bad person. He isn't a bad person at all, it wasn't even his fault that he was there. But when you haven't eaten for... for a long time, your brain starts to play games with you. Starts to make you think things you wouldn't normally think. He wasn't thinking right when he took the knife. He just wanted to eat."

Tony swallows convulsively—once, twice, three times—but his voice still comes out hoarse when he says, "And you know this because you watched it happen to Felipe? Or because it happened to you too?"

"She wasn't feeding either of us. We were being punished."

Tony swallows again. This time he swallows bile.

“Whatever you did, kid, you know that isn’t something—”

“I know it was messed up,” says Peter blandly. “But it’s fine, Mr. Stark. Messed up stuff happens all the time.”

“It’s not fine. It’s so far from fine it’s ridiculous.”

Peter shrugs again. “It’s what it is.”

There is a long pause, during which Tony is exceptionally glad *he* is not the one hooked up to a heart monitor, because he’s pretty sure the combination of rage and disgust and horror would make his heart sound like a bomb ten seconds away from exploding. He clenches his fists to try to slow it, because this is not about him, was never about him. This is about the kid.

“So if it was Felipe’s knife,” he says at last, “how come your name is the one on the police report?”

“Because I tried to take it off him. He was going after Ms. Charlise and if he’d done anything... I just wanted to stop him, but he fought me off and I ended up hurting my hand.” Peter flexes said hand now. It is still red and raw with half-healed burns, though it looks eons better than it did last night. There is not, as far as Tony can see, a scar from a knife wound. “Felipe had a record, but I didn’t. I knew I’d get in less trouble than he would.”

“So you took the fall.”

Peter nods.

“And then they sent you—”

“To Skip, yeah.” Peter stops flexing his hand. When he looks up, his eyelids are drooping slightly, and his voice is a little quieter, signalling he’s reaching the end of what little energy he regained from the few hours of sleep he managed. “You mentioned the fight. Last night. The fight I had at school.”

“It’s fine,” says Tony. He’s heard enough. From the kid now and from Maria a few hours ago, though even she couldn’t bring herself to repeat the details of what DeMarcus had told her. Even without them Tony has heard more than he ever wanted to. “You don’t have to explain it. I understand.”

But Peter shakes his head hard, once, trying to wake himself back up. Maybe he’s too tired to know what he’s saying, or maybe, now that he’s finally had the chance to speak the truth, he wants to keep going until it’s all out, rip the bandage off at once.

“I got into a fight with Ned. And my grades were... pretty bad for a while. But it wasn’t because I didn’t care. Ned thought it was, and Principal Morita thought it was. And I know you probably think I ran away because I just wanted to be Spider-Man—”

“I don’t—”

“—but it wasn’t that. I cared. I did, I was just... I was just really tired. Yeah. I was just really tired.”

Now, at last, tears spill out of Peter’s eyes. He makes no attempt to wipe them away, doesn’t even

blink, so Tony has the feeling he hasn't really noticed them. They don't stop—just pour down his cheeks, silently, in two steady streams, while he continues to look at Tony, half-asleep and half-imploring. Hoping that someone will finally understand.

Tony reaches into his pocket. He pulls out his StarkPhone, and, gently, careful not to touch Peter, places it on the bed beside him.

Peter stares down at it. Tears splash onto the bedspread and Peter swipes at them, noticing them for the first time. But he doesn't touch the phone.

"I don't need—"

"I should never have taken your suit."

Peter shakes his head.

"I deserved it," he says. "You were right. Those people could have died."

"No. Even if you were... reckless, I know you were doing what you thought was right. You were just working with the best information you had. And you didn't have enough because I wasn't upfront with you. I was dealing with my own stuff, Peter. That's not an excuse, just an explanation, and kind of a shitty one, but it's the truth. I was dealing with my own stuff and that meant you were on your own when you should have had help. I shouldn't have taken your suit. I'm sorry."

Peter swallows hard, still crying, still staring at the phone. So Tony reaches out, and turns it on.

"You okay with making a switch, FRI?"

"Of course, boss."

"Put her through."

FRIDAY's gold-themed OS disappears from the screen, replaced by an interface that is mostly red, and a voice that is more chipper, but still soft.

"Hi Peter," says Karen.

Karen's voice is what finally does it: Peter's face crumples. He puts his hands over it before Tony sees too much, but he gets the gist, and he gets to his feet.

"I'll leave you alone," he says softly. "That's all yours, kid. No matter what. And for what it's worth... I am really sorry."

Tony raises his hand on instinct, lets it hover over Peter's shoulder. But he withdraws it at the last second, turns to leave without touching. He hears Karen saying something, low and comforting, as he exits the room, but he closes the door before he can hear Peter's reply.

Out in the common area, Tony makes a beeline for the nurses' desk.

"Hey." He drums his fingers on the desk until the nurse behind it looks up, and ignores the obvious flush that rises to her cheeks when she recognizes him. "Peter Parker? Do you know when the doc said it's okay to get him some food?"

To her credit, this nurse doesn't let his fame garble her. She fumbles on her computer for a second.

"Uh—it looks like liquids only for the next twelve hours, but if he's awake I can get him a

milkshake and maybe some broth.”

“Can you? Quickly, preferably?”

The nurse nods and grabs her phone.

Sighing, Tony turns away before she can put the order in, needing to get a breath of air and take a minute alone before he has to dive back into the many, many arrangements he has to make in order to take the kid home, but before he makes it a step the nurse calls after him.

“Oh—Mr. Stark.”

He turns back.

“I’m supposed to let you know that someone from Child Protective Services is downstairs. We’re still on strict orders not to let anyone up, but apparently they’re being pretty insistent—do you want us to tell security to get them off campus?”

Tony’s heart resumes its angry pace.

“No,” he says. “I’ll take care of it myself.”

Tony tries to calm himself down on the brief elevator ride to the lobby. Unfortunately for Margaret Esposito, he’s not especially successful: what little decorum he regained between the doors sliding shut and opening again disappears the moment he spots her.

She’s leaning against the visitor’s desk, back turned to him, having what sounds like a frustrated conversation with the receptionist, so she doesn’t notice Tony right away. Her hair is piled on top of her head in a greasy bun and she is dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt, half-concealed under a long jacket. She must have been sleeping when she got the call, but the fact that someone from CPS is, for once, putting the kid above all else—including appearances—does very little to assuage Tony’s fury.

“In case you didn’t get the memo, Marge, your services are no longer required.”

Margaret turns around. She looks faintly furious at first, but when she recognizes Tony it sloughs away. Behind her glasses, her eyes are red.

“Is he here?” she says. “Do you have him?”

Tony ignores this.

“Tell me, Ms. Esposito, do you do any sort of research into your foster parents, or do you just throw your kids to the first likely-looking predator who applies?”

She closes her mouth so fast Tony can practically hear her jaw click shut. Even from a few feet away—a distance he keeps because he doesn’t trust himself to be too near her right now—he can see she is shaking.

Good. Let her feel some small fraction of the discomfort Peter has been living with for the last year and a half.

“Did you know?” Tony demands. “Did you have any sort of clue what that breathing pile of garbage *did* to the kids you people put in his care, or were you just so glad to have him out of your hands you didn’t bother to look twice?”

The color drains from Margaret’s face. For a second Tony thinks she’s going to back down; instead, she steels herself.

“I need to see him,” she says.

“Not a *fucking* chance.”

“Mr. Stark, Child Protective Services needs—”

“Child Protective Services needs nothing. Child Protective Services will get *nothing*. Just like you did *nothing* to protect that child. You think you get to come in here and pretend to give a shit now that it’s time to cover your own asses? Not on my watch. Not ever again. Peter Parker is no longer your responsibility, *Miss Esposito*. And if I see you anywhere near this hospital in the next twenty-four hours, I’ll have my guys take care of you. Believe me, they’re a lot scarier than hospital security.”

Margaret’s eyes are full of tears now, but Tony can’t muster an ounce of sympathy. He turns to the college kid running the front desk, who’s been watching their confrontation with wide eyes.

“Hey,” he says, and she jumps, “do me a favor, and make sure Ms. Esposito here makes her way off the grounds?”

The girl nods and picks up her phone. Margaret stands as if rooted, shaking and silent.

“Goodbye Margaret,” Tony says. “Let’s not meet again.”

Tony turns on his heel before his rage can get the better of him, and he hurries out the front doors without looking back, not even as two security guards hustle past him, headed toward yet another person who failed Peter Parker.

A Gasp of Air

Tony's breath turns out to be more of a gasp—like coming up for air just long enough to avoid drowning before diving even deeper. He makes it two steps outside a back entrance, braces himself against the nearest wall, and waits until the tremors of residual fury subside. It takes a moment—just a moment—and when they are gone an unexpected emotion arrives to take fury's place: regret.

Margaret Esposito might be a part of the system that landed Peter in this mess, but as far as he can tell she didn't have anything to do with the actual landing. Of all the people he's spoken to in the last week, she is the only one who tried to tell him that Peter was more than what is in his file. That he was worth a damn. That he was just a kid.

That rage shouldn't have been directed at her. It should have been directed at himself.

But by the time Tony straightens up and hurries back inside, ducking his head to avoid the curious glances of the smokers and the lobby-lingerers, it is too late. Margaret is gone and Tony is alone, and maybe, he tells himself, maybe that's for the best. Culpable or not, Margaret still works for CPS—an organization Tony went to great lengths last night to remove from Peter Parker's life.

And besides, this next part is all on him.

While Happy is working on the apartment, Tony has one of his undercover security guys bring him a spare phone. He transfers all his data and his contacts, remotely wipes the one he gave to Peter, and sets it up with a new private number—which he immediately sends to Ned Leeds, who has texted Tony no fewer than fifty-eight times since Happy sent him Tony's number. Tony doesn't even hesitate: if Peter Parker trusted the kid at a time when he trusted absolutely no one else, that is good enough. Tony trusts him too.

He heads back to the third-floor lobby, finds an unoccupied corner, and hunches over the new phone. There is more to be done. Tony is frantically running through all his memories of his teenage years, trying to remember what he was like at that time, what he needed—but he has a feeling Peter won't share a burgeoning need to rebel against his parents with fifteen-year-old Tony, nor the rich-kid complex that had Tony out to simultaneously create and destroy the most impressive things he could get his hands when he was that age. So, what then? School? Should he be enrolling the kid in school? That sounds like an awful can of worms to open, but won't Tony get in some sort of trouble if he doesn't? Or what about therapy? That seems like something the kid will probably need, but Tony is woefully uninformed when it comes to even his own mental health, and has never found a specialist who is even remotely qualified to deal with adult-superhero problems, let alone kid-superhero ones. The closest he's ever come to getting help was that time he rambled to Bruce while the latter fell asleep on his couch. And, granted, it *was* helpful, but the same is decidedly *not* an option when it comes to the kid. For a whole host of reasons.

While this nonsense rattles around in Tony's brain, a greater problem looms over all of it: nobody knows who Peter is, or how he is connected to Spider-Man, or even that he is suddenly, inexplicably, Tony Stark's kid. And the second any of that gets out is the second Peter's life gets blown even more to hell than it already has been.

How is he supposed to do this? How is he supposed to give the kid even a semblance of the normal, stable life he deserves? What was he *thinking* when he signed those papers?

Tony has never felt more useless in his entire life.

In the end, he doesn't do anything. Just closes his phone—leaving about a hundred unread messages—and heads back to the kid's room. Peter is asleep again by the time he arrives; there is a barely-touched milkshake on the bedside table, and Peter's hand is curled around the StarkPhone, but otherwise it is eerily similar to the night before—bruises and bandages and all white and sterile and utterly impersonal in a way that simultaneously makes Tony's stomach churn and, finally, helps him make his real decision on the kid's behalf since he signed those papers.

He pulls out his phone and texts Happy.

Tony: *Once apartment is ready need you on standby. As soon as he's awake, we're taking the kid home.*

Peter sleeps another five hours. Tony knows it isn't enough—just like he knows the kid should probably be under medical supervision at least until he has a few thousand calories in him—but he also knows that they are done with the hospital. He knows it from the way Peter flinches when he wakes up to discover Tony still seated next to his bed. He knows it when Peter continues to flinch every time a nurse comes in (worse, if the nurse is male). He knows it from the way Peter only touches his milkshake when Tony physically presses it into his hands, and then only takes a few cautious sips, watching Tony out of the corner of his eye like he is either about to snatch it out of his hand or force it down his throat, and can't decide which is worse. He knows it, too, because if he, Tony, spends another second in this cramped room, sitting in awkward silence and stealing glances at his phone whenever another news alert about Spider-Man comes in, he's going to absolutely lose his shit.

Since today is not a day Tony wants to lose his shit—at least, not for a second time—he texts Happy to come and get them, and he excuses himself to go check Peter out. He knows as soon as they're out of the hospital it's only a matter of time until the press gets wind of the kid, but he's hoping to at least have Peter settled in—hunkered down—before the media bombs start falling. The nurse says she'll expedite it, but even Tony is surprised by how fast she is: he makes a quick trip downstairs, to make sure Happy is there—he is—and to grab some supplies from the waiting car, and by the time he gets back to Peter's room there is already someone there, wearing a white coat and leaning over Peter's bed, speaking to him in a lowered voice. Peter, upright and awake but still clearly exhausted, and a little red-eyed, is listening with his eyes slightly downturned. He is still clutching the StarkPhone.

Tony taps on the doorframe. They both look up, and Tony sees that the visitor is Dr. Brainerd. She is holding her tablet again, and she smiles reassuringly at Peter before leaving his bedside to meet Tony in the doorway, where she speaks to him in a lowered voice.

"I've been on standby," she says, in response to the question Tony didn't ask. "I just got the page he's being checked out. I wanted to examine him one more time before I gave the green light."

"How's he looking?"

"Physically? He's okay, I think. He's cagey when I ask, but his labs look good, and the x-rays show even the worst of the fractures are mostly healed. The fatigue is going to be constant for a while. He's still catching up on sleep and nutrients, but we expected that. Just go slow with the food for the next few days. I'm sending you home with a list of some easy, bland meals you can make, but don't be surprised if he has trouble keeping things down for a while. He's going to have

to readjust to a regular diet, and even with his metabolism—maybe especially with his metabolism—it's going to take some time.”

“So you're... giving him the go ahead, then? He's good to go?”

Dr. Brainerd raises an eyebrow. “Should I? You sound petrified, Mr. Stark.”

Tony must be, if it's that obvious. He shakes his head, sticks out a hand.

“I really can't thank you enough,” he says. “For helping him, and for keeping quiet. If you ever need a new wing for the hospital or... I don't know, a beach house? I'm—”

“I'll let you know.” For the first time since he met her, Dr. Brainerd smiles. It softens her whole face, makes her look younger. She pats his hand as she lets it go. “You're doing a good thing, Mr. Stark. Just take care of him. And call me if you need anything. My personal number is in the file.”

She hands him the tablet. Tony signs, and then Dr. Brainerd takes her leave.

It's just him and Peter now.

Tony takes a breath, and approaches.

Peter is still in the bed, still in his hospital gown, but the IV has been disconnected, as have the heart monitors. Tony thought the absence of these things would make him look less minuscule, but without them Peter somehow looks untethered, like a balloon without a string, drifting through an open sky. Tony notices how Peter's fingers tighten slightly on the StarkPhone when he sits beside him, as though he expects Tony to rip it out of his hand. He doesn't meet Tony's eye as Tony sets the backpack Happy bought on the bed beside him, but he does make an attempt at a smile, which doesn't quite come through.

“I told you I heal fast.”

Whatever humor Peter is attempting doesn't quite come through, either. It sounds like he is using every ounce of his effort to keep his voice from trembling.

Well. Tony can't exactly say he blames him. He wouldn't be his first choice to go home with either, if he was in the kid's position, but it still stings a little to see the evidence of Peter's uncertainty in the clench of his hand, and the way the corners of his lips twitch as he tries to maintain some semblance of a smile.

“I... brought you some clothes,” says Tony, nudging the backpack. “Just so you don't have to walk out of here in your hospital skivvies. Though I see those things tie on the side now. Last time I was in a public hospital was around two thousand four, I think, and that was when they still believed a healthy dose of humiliation was good for the constitution, so the gowns didn't leave much to the imagination. It was a good motive not to do a lot of the things I was ending up in the hospital for, and yet somehow I always managed—I'm rambling. Yes. Rambling. A lot. Just—” He starts to huff a frustrated sigh, clamps it off. “Here,” he says, and he nudges the bag again.

Eyes still downturned, Peter takes the bag.

“Thanks, Mr. Stark,” he says quietly. “Um... I'll just get changed.”

Peter winces as he gets out of bed, his movements stiff and slow as an old man's. The impulse to help him is almost unbearable, but Tony doesn't miss the hardness in Peter's expression as he wrestles with his own body, nor does he miss the way those downturned eyes nevertheless remain

wary of Tony's hands, his position relative to Peter's own. Tony keeps his seat. Only when Peter has shut the bathroom door, giving Tony another tentative-but-encouraging smile as he does, does Tony drop his head into his hands, suppressing a groan.

This is going to be rough.

He lifts his head immediately when the door opens once more. Peter comes out, still walking stiffly but improved, if only slightly, by the jeans and t-shirt that have taken the place of the hospital gown.

"Okay." Tony gets to his feet. "I think they need to wheel you out of here so you don't slip on a banana peel and careen off a cliff like an old-timey cartoon character, or something—or is that something else that's changed since two thousand four? It can't be. Hospitals still hate liability, right? So, uh—you just hang tight a second, I'll see—"

Tony starts to head for the door, marvelling at how this situation has somehow turned more awkward than the time he drunkenly tripped into the open grave at his great-uncle's funeral. He's desperately hoping an orderly will be waiting behind it to save him from his sudden inability to behave like a grown adult, when Peter says,

"Um, Mr. Stark?"

Tony turns around, faces him.

"Yeah, kid?"

"Where am I going?"

Tony stares at him blankly.

"Come again?"

Peter has to swallow a few times before he can repeat himself. The hand that is not holding the StarkPhone is clenched into a fist at his side, but even still it is shaking.

"Where am I going?" he says. "Was... was my social worker supposed to come talk to me? Because I don't think she ever did, but maybe she came while I was still out of it? It's just, no one's said anything and I... was just wondering, I guess."

Tony stares at him for another beat. Then he says, "Oh, my God."

Peter flushes. Lowers his head.

"Sorry," he says. Tries to laugh, but can't manage it. Turns it into a cough. "Sorry, I—that was stupid, I don't know why I thought you would know. I just thought, because CPS hadn't... and you've been here, so I guess I just—"

"No. *No*. That wasn't an, 'oh my God, why would you ask me that,' that was an 'oh my God I'm the world's *biggest* jackass.' I just assumed you knew, but of course you didn't know, because I didn't say anything. Peter. You're coming home with me."

Peter looks up. His eyes are shining.

"What?"

"I'm taking you home," Tony repeats. "I have an apartment in the city, Happy's got it all ready for

you— *us*. Because I'll be there too, obviously, I'm not just going to MaCaulay Culkin you on the Upper East Side while you're recovering from every injury known to man. Or ever. Of course not ever, I'm—this is all coming out very badly. I have a place, is the point. A place for you to live. You're gonna live with me now."

Peter is looking at Tony like he has suddenly started speaking Esperanto. Tony isn't entirely sure he hasn't. His mouth seems to be doing things of its own accord. Which, granted, it often does. But generally it says better things. Cleverer things. Things that don't make him wish he could beam himself to an alien planet in order to avoid the bemused, slightly injured expression on the face of the teenage boy standing in front of him.

"Is that... okay?" Tony ventures.

Peter nods, slowly.

"But... for how long?"

Tony opens his mouth. The reply is right there. He knows what he's supposed to say: *forever* is such a simple word. But he's only just realized how heavy it is, sitting there on his tongue.

Before he can make it emerge, the door opens. An orderly comes in, pushing a wheelchair.

"Hospital policy," the orderly says. "Your chariot awaits."

They bring Peter out the back as a favor to Tony—probably more as a favor to the kid, to avoid any prying eyes, though somehow, miraculously, the news still hasn't gotten hold of Peter's name. Happy is there, standing next to the car, which he has parked between two industrial-sized dumpsters full of biohazardous waste. This feels like a metaphor to Tony, but he can't figure out what for. So he just stands by awkwardly as Peter gets out of the wheelchair and the orderly heads back into the hospital.

"Hey, Spider-Man," says Happy, who looks just as tired and miserable as Tony feels. "So... you're a kid, huh?"

"Yeah. But... you can call me Peter, if you want."

"Peter." Happy opens the door. Peter only hesitates a second before climbing in. "Look, kid. Peter. If it makes any difference at all—I'm really sorry. For ignoring you. For—"

"It's okay," says Peter wearily. "I didn't want anyone to know."

Happy looks like he wants to say something about this. He wrestles with himself for a second, but in the end he just nods, and shuts the door.

Happy gets in the driver's seat. Tony gets in the front. Silently, they begin to drive.

Somewhere around 51st Street, the *forever* Tony should have said in the hospital room works its way loose. He turns around, mouth open—

But Peter is asleep.

The relief at being out of the hospital—out of the public eye, away from the smell of disinfectant and the ceaseless sounds of medical machines, away from watching Peter wince at impersonal touches and obligatory needle pokes and endless side-eyed glances from the staff—does not last as long as Tony was hoping it would. It lasts, in fact, about forty-five seconds, because that is how long it takes the private elevator to arrive at the top-floor penthouse apartment that is Tony's Upper East Side home.

As soon as the doors open, Tony almost wishes they hadn't left the hospital at all.

It's not that Peter reacts badly.

It's that he doesn't react at all.

He woke up again just a few blocks away from Tony's building, and declined all offers of help as they took the cook's entrance to access the elevator, but the two minutes or so of unassisted standing have clearly cost him: by the time the doors ding open, Peter is swaying like they're on a ship at high seas instead of the top floor of a New York high rise, though neither Happy nor Tony—standing awkwardly alongside—reach out to steady him. Peter steps out of the elevator without hesitating—not out of any bravado, Tony thinks, but because he doesn't want to be trapped in the small space with them any longer. He and Happy exchange a glance before following him.

As soon as they are all standing in the foyer, Tony feels something he has never felt when introducing a guest to any of his homes: embarrassment. He is overcome with the urge to explain himself—to explain the vaulted ceilings, the sunken living room, the holographic screens covering almost every surface. He wants to apologize for what suddenly seems like an absurd amount of square footage, for the open-concept design that gives them not only a view of the entire living area but also of the state-of-the-art kitchen, and the high, broad windows that provide a three hundred and sixty degree panorama of the city around and below.

But there is no need to apologize, because Peter doesn't look at any of it. He just stands in the entranceway, facing Tony and Happy, and says, "Do I—what am I supposed to do?"

Tony and Happy exchange another helpless glance.

Tony steps forward first.

"Nothing, kid," he says. "Nothing just—come on. Let's get you to bed."

Tony doesn't miss the way the kid's shoulders twitch a little when he says it—just like in the abandoned warehouse, when Tony thought he was going to make another break for it. Once again, though, Peter doesn't run. Just follows when Tony leads him down the adjacent hallway, while Happy heads for the kitchen, looking relieved to have an excuse not to follow.

Tony finds himself praying Peter doesn't notice how red the back of his neck is as the latter follows him down the hall to the second bedroom. He finds himself praying, too, that Happy hasn't gone overboard on the room—though chances seem slim, as Happy has been employed by a man who used to have him race sports cars through the canyonlands as part of his regular duties for the better part of fifteen years.

But when Tony opens the bedroom door, he is relieved to find that Happy has, perhaps out of the

same strange shame Tony himself is feeling, kept everything simple. There is a brand new comforter on the bed, and blackout curtains on the windows, but other than that it looks more or less like the guest bedroom Tony remembers. In addition to the bed there is an armchair by the window, a door to the attached bathroom, closed, and another door to the closet, this one open. The closet is the only area that really shows evidence of Happy's intervention: it is full of brand-new clothes.

Peter's eyes linger on these clothes for a moment, but dart away as soon as he realizes Tony is looking.

"You should—get some rest, probably. We checked you out pretty early, kid. You must still be tired."

"Okay."

Peter goes and sits on the edge of the bed almost robotically. He doesn't lie down.

"I'll... do you... need anything?"

Peter shakes his head.

"Okay. If you think of anything just shout. Or don't, actually. FRIDAY runs the house, she can, um..."

Tony trails off. He lingers in the doorway for a moment, half hoping Peter will say something else and half hoping he will just drop back into sleep immediately. When neither of these things happens, Tony takes his leave, shutting the door behind him.

Back in the kitchen, Tony collapses onto one of the stools surrounding the island, puts his forehead in his hands, and says, "Who do you think I murdered in my previous life to end up with this one?"

Happy is wrestling with the lid of the blender, which contains some frothy white liquid Tony can't identify, sets it aside.

"We're still good, you and I, right?" he says. "This isn't like, a farewell favor for what happened on the beach?"

Tony is so startled by this he looks up.

"Happy, I didn't even get rid of you when you quit working for me to run security for Pepper. You're like a fleshy, man-shaped version of Thor's hammer. All I have to do is stick my hand out and *bam*, there you are."

"Disturbing metaphor aside, I'm gonna guess that means yes."

"Yes," says Tony. "Yes, that means yes. Hell, Happy, you know we're in it til the end."

"Good," says Happy. "Then you can't get pissed at me for what I'm about to say."

Tony braces himself. But he nods.

Happy appears to brace himself too.

"Boss," he says, "I think what we did to that kid might be the worst mistake you or I have ever made."

Tony flinches. But before he can tell Happy that he is absolutely, unequivocally correct, Happy goes on.

“But this? What you’re doing right here? I think this is the bravest thing I’ve ever seen you do. And I’ve seen you do a lot.” Happy wets his lips, presses them together, then says, firmly, “I hoped you’d have kids someday. I always thought you’d be one hell of a dad.”

Tony snorts, incredulous, but it takes just a fraction of a second to realize Happy isn’t joking. He’s just watching Tony with an uncharacteristically quiet, serious expression, and he doesn’t look away until Tony does.

“Thank you, Happy,” he says softly. “Why don’t you—just get some sleep? You look terrible.”

“Back at you, boss.” But Happy smiles nonetheless. He claps Tony on the shoulder as he heads for the door. “Anything you need. You know that, right?”

Tony nods.

And Happy leaves.

Once he is gone, an untenable exhaustion settles deep in Tony’s bones. It’s the kind of tiredness that almost seems to take him outside of himself; when he closes his eyes, he imagines he is hovering a few inches above his body.

When he opens them, however, he is still in his own head. Right where he’s always been.

Tony gets to his feet. He pours the foamy white liquid into a glass, grabs a handful of painkillers and antibiotics from the pile of pill bottles they gave him before he and the kid left the hospital. He places these things on a tray, and heads back to Peter’s room.

When he opens the door, however, Peter’s bed is empty.

There is a horrible, jolting moment of fear, wherein Tony nearly drops the tray, thinking the kid must have made a run for it. He turns toward the window, already thinking of summoning a suit, and he sees—

Peter. Curled up in the armchair. Asleep again, but alive, and very much present.

Tony has to clamp his mouth shut to keep his sigh of relief from becoming audible. Then he tiptoes into the room, sets the tray on the bedside table, and grabs the comforter off the bed. He places it over Peter, who does not stir, and then he once again makes his exit, this time to find some sleep of his own.

“Boss, you’ve got a visitor.”

Tony looks up from the pan. It’s morning—early morning. The few hours of sleep he managed were not enough, not by a mile, but they were enough he can start taking the tiny first steps that so eluded him yesterday. School and therapy can wait. For now, food and shelter will have to do.

Of course, the *food* part is still eluding him. His attempt at cooking breakfast has started to congeal in a way he is not certain is entirely correct for scrambled eggs.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Was something about *lockdown* unclear? No visitors, FRI. No nothing. I don't care if the Dalai Lama is at the door, you just tell him we're all stocked up on Nirvana for the day and send him on his way."

"Sorry, boss," says FRIDAY. "Nothing I can do about this one."

Something twangs in Tony's stomach. There are only two people whose access codes override his lockdown protocols, and seeing as Happy left not seven hours ago to get his first real sleep in several days, that can only mean—

"Uh, FRIDAY." Tony tosses his spatula aside, looking around the kitchen: it looks like a war zone. When he glances down, the front of the t-shirt he wore to bed is covered in raw eggs. "Please, please stall her for a minute. I just need time to—"

"Get your cover straight?"

Too late; when he looks up, Pepper is standing in the doorway, clutching the handle of a small suitcase and somehow managing to make sweatpants and a ponytail look elegant. She looks tired, but not tired enough to negate the look of exasperation she is wearing as Tony, still fumbling with the eggshells all over the counter, freezes.

She raises an eyebrow.

Caught.

"Hey, Pep," says Tony. "Um—breakfast?"

Pepper doesn't move.

"Do you know where I was last night?" she says.

"This... sounds like a trick question. Are you trying to make me jealous?"

"Tony."

"Because if you're trying to make me jealous, I should probably warn you, I have just had the most desensitizing couple of days. Like, run me through with a sword and take me square dancing sort of desensitizing. I realize that isn't really a saying, but to be honest you've caught me a little off guard here. And as good as it is to see you—you look great, by the way, did you do something with your hair? no?—anyway, I'm kind of in the middle of a whole thing right now, so maybe you could —"

"Japan," says Pepper. "I was in Japan last night, trying to negotiate the deal *you* initiated with the CEO of Suzuki. Do you remember that deal, Tony?"

"Oh, yeah. That was the—the robot thing. Transformers? No, that can't be right. Solar—something?"

"Self-driving cars."

"Right, the self—did I mention I'm a little mixed up today?"

"Self-driving cars, Tony. A potentially multi-billion dollar market in Japan, which we are *inches* away from securing first rights to for Stark Industries. Your company. Do you remember your company, Tony?"

“There’s a vague—”

“I run your company,” Pepper goes on. “Or, supposedly I do. I’m the person they send to negotiate multi-billion dollar deals, anyway. And do you know what I really hate when I’m negotiating multi-billion dollar deals with Japanese executives?”

“Shingles flare-ups? Untameable cow-licks? Um—”

“Lawyers.”

“Really? Seems like those are kind of an inevitability in that... particular scenario.”

“To be more precise,” Pepper says, like she hasn’t heard him, “*your* lawyers. All of whom took it in turns to *repeatedly* use their codes for my secure line, until I had no choice but to walk out in the middle of this multi-billion dollar deal because I was pretty sure someone had died. And I was pretty sure that person was you.”

Tony deflates. Sighs. Says, “Pepper—”

“Dead, Tony. I thought you were dead.” At last, Pepper steps into the kitchen, leaving her bag in the doorway. “Which, by the way, is exactly the scenario I never wanted to be in again. I don’t want to have to wait for an emergency phone call in the middle of the night, or walk out of a meeting trying to remember the last time I spoke to you and wondering if it was the last time I ever would.”

“Pepper...”

“But it turns out that fear was unfounded. Because your lawyers weren’t calling to tell me you were dead. Do you know what they were calling to tell me, Tony?”

Tony grits his teeth. “No?”

“Neither do I. Because apparently, whatever harebrained, half-assed legal disaster you roped them into came with such a staunch non-disclosure clause, they couldn’t even tell me about it. All I got to hear was Tom Bradley, a man who oversaw the Verizon merger without breaking a sweat, practically crying begging me to come back and talk some sense into you.”

“Is he the sweaty one?”

“So here I am, getting on a jet to New York on what was supposed to be one of the biggest days of my career, to deal with a problem I don’t understand created by a man I am no longer dating and you know what I’m thinking the whole time? I’m thinking, how did I end up here? I studied art history, Tony. I was going to move to Paris in my twenties. I was going to study Renoir and sit at cafes by the Seine drinking coffee and thinking about art, and instead I’m spending my nights literally chasing a grown man around the world cleaning up his messes.”

“To be fair, I don’t think you can *entirely* blame that art thing on me.”

“Oh, I’m sure you don’t. Because unlike me, you actually know what’s going on here. So can we skip the part where you dance around and feed me pithy little half-truths, and just *tell* me what you did so I can fix it, like I always do, and then go home and have a glass of wine and never, never think about this day again? Because to be honest, Tony, I’m—”

“It’s a kid.”

Finally, Pepper stops talking.

“I—what?”

“It’s a kid,” Tony says again. He has never been able to keep a secret from Pepper Potts, not in nearly fifteen years of knowing her, and there’s no way he’s going to be able to start with this one. “That’s what the lawyers are freaking out about. I have a kid.”

Slowly, Pepper sits in one of the stools by the kitchen island. For once, he has managed to catch her by surprise. Her throat works for a moment before she replies.

“Oh.” She leans an elbow on the marble, puts her forehead in her hand. “I mean, I can’t say I never thought about it. It’s not like your life, you know, before *us* was any kind of secret... but I thought after almost ten years of dating if anyone was gonna come forward they would have done it. Who’s the mother?”

“What? Pepper, *no*. No, no, no. He’s not *my* kid. I mean, he *is* my kid, but only since yesterday. I didn’t *make* him. I just found him.”

Pepper looks up, hard and sharp.

“*What?*”

Tony sighs. He sinks into the chair across from hers.

“I adopted a kid, Pepper. Teenager, to be more specific. He’s fifteen. And—technically it’s a legal guardianship, but I’m told it’s almost as big a deal. At least that’s what the sweaty lawyer said.”

Pepper stares at him, head still in her hand, for a very long moment.

“Are you messing with me right now?” she says. “Because if you are, this is officially the least funny prank or—method of getting my attention or whatever this is—”

“I’m not messing with you.” Tony gestures toward the hallway. “He’s asleep, but he’s real. A real kid. Really mine, now.”

“He’s *here*?”

“Last time I checked.”

“*Tony*.” Pepper looks scandalized. “What are you—what—how—you can’t have a kid, Tony.”

“You seemed pretty comfortable with the idea when you thought I had a secret love child.”

“That’s different, that’s—*adoption*? Is this some kind of... mid-life crisis? Is this because of what happened with Steve? Or—Tony, please tell me you aren’t doing this because of *us*? You know that isn’t—”

“It has nothing to do with that,” Tony snaps, and for the first time he feels irritated. He might not have changed Pepper’s access codes, but that doesn’t change the fact that *she* broke up with *him*. And if there’s one thing he isn’t in the mood for, it’s yet another lecture on how big a fuck-up he still is, even after having lost her. “I might be a narcissist, but I’m not a sociopath. I know I’m completely unsuited for parenthood.” He gestures around the kitchen. “I don’t know what I’m doing. Jesus, Pepper, do you really think I would drag some poor kid into the mess that is my life just to get your attention? And you’re coming here mad at me for not keeping you in the loop, but

if I recall correctly, *you're* the one who said you needed space. I've respected that. I'm still respecting that. I didn't ask my lawyers to call you, and I didn't ask you to come out here and tear me a new one, because as you pointed out, I'm a grown up. I'm handling it. I'm handling all of it, so can you please just—"

Tony is cut off by the sound of the fire alarm. He whips around; smoke is billowing out of the pan of scrambled eggs.

"*Shit.*" Tony leaps to his feet, yanks the pan off the burner and throws it into the sink, pours cold water over the blackened eggs. "Cut the alarm FRIDAY, it's fine, it's fine."

The alarm stops. FRIDAY opens a window. As the smoke begins to clear, Tony turns back to the island and sees that Pepper has gotten to her feet and started to approach him, but she's stopped a few paces away. The incredulity is gone. She looks nervous.

"You were never a narcissist, Tony," she says quietly.

Tony suddenly feels exhausted. The few hours of sleep did not buy him enough energy to deal with this today. Missing Pepper has been like an open wound, and the fact that she is standing in front of him does not lessen that pain. If anything, it sharpens it.

He leans against the counter and puts his head in his hands.

"Have you heard about Steven Westcott?" he says.

"The—the guy from the Spider-Man thing? I saw something on the news on the plane. Didn't they arrest him for—"

"Being a child molesting piece of shit?" Tony looks up. "Yeah." He points to his chest. "That was me, who had him hauled in. About a year too late, but there you have it."

"What does that have to do with—"

"The kid he molested?" Tony's stomach cramps painfully just saying it, but he does. "He's sleeping in the second bedroom down the hall."

"Oh. Oh, Tony."

Pepper puts a hand out, but Tony can't handle her touching him right now. He doesn't deserve it. He shrugs his shoulder out of the way, and Pepper withdraws.

"They're speculating you might be involved," she says. "That's what I thought this was about. They're saying it's a cover-up, that you're covering for the Spider-Man guy because he was with you in Germany. Is that why he kidnapped those kids? Because—"

"It wasn't a kidnapping," says Tony. "It was a rescue mission. He knew Westcott was... he knew what he was doing. Spider-Man was just getting them out of there."

"Tony... are you sure? Because this is about more than just the kids, this... even if Spider-Man was right, he's already in hot water for what happened in Germany, and he has a reputation for being... and you sticking your neck out for him—"

"Is the only option," says Tony. "And I'm sure. I'm sure because..." He sighs. She's in too deep now; she's going to find out anyway. "Because the kid I sort of adopted? The one sleeping down the hall, the one Westcott molested? He *is* Spider-Man."

Pepper sits again. This time she sits next to him.

“I think you’d better start from the beginning.”

A Non-Starter

It takes the better part of an hour to get the whole story out. Pepper doesn't interrupt. She doesn't ask questions. She just listens while Tony talks, her hands twitching on the countertop. Occasionally her eyes flicker toward the hallway, but mostly they are fixed on Tony's face, watching him in that careful, knowing way only Pepper can manage. It gets him through most of it, this awful story of the worst series of mistakes Tony has ever made, but when he gets to the part where he has to tell her what happened in the moments before he unmasked Peter, the words catch in Tony's throat. The guilt is constricting.

Instead of recounting the events—chasing Peter down, calling him a delinquent, pinning him to the floor—what Tony says is this:

"He didn't think he could tell me, Pepper. He'd been living on the streets for five months. He barely ate, he barely slept... he didn't have *anything* except that stupid suit, which I..." Tony shakes his head. "And he decided he'd rather live like that than even try to tell me what was going on. Who he was, what had happened to him... he thought he was better off keeping all of that secret than talking to me."

"I don't think... Tony, trauma behaves in all kinds of strange ways." It's the first thing Pepper has said the entire time. "Remember how you cut me out? With the palladium?"

"This is different, Pep," says Tony. "He wasn't being irrational. He was right not to trust me. The very first time he fucked up, what did I do? I told him he was nothing, and I took his suit." Frustration rises; Tony lets the tiniest bit off by flicking a piece of burnt egg across the counter and onto the floor. "Fifteen years old, homeless, using all his time and effort trying to make this shitty world just a little less shitty, and I called him *nothing*."

Pepper takes a deep breath. "I'm sure you meant it as a... tough love thing. If you had known the exact circumstances..."

Tony scoffs. "Yeah. Tough love. That always worked so well for me. God, I'm becoming my father."

Pepper puts a hand on Tony's arm. This time he doesn't throw it off.

"You're not your father, Tony. Your father never knew how to fix the things he broke. But you've never been like that. You always fix your mistakes."

Tony shakes his head.

"Do you know what he said to me, Pepper? The first thing he said, after I pulled the mask off? He said, 'Please don't send me back.' He thought I would have... even then, he thought there was a chance I would just... hand him back over. To that fucking... inhuman—"

Tony bites his tongue.

Pepper doesn't say anything. But she doesn't move her hand, either.

Tony puts his own hand over it.

"I know you didn't want this," he says. "I know the reason you and I ended is because you needed to stop being pulled into all my shit, and because I couldn't—*can't*—not do what I do. I understand

that. I hate it. It breaks my heart. But I understand it, and you have to believe me, I really was trying to respect the fact that you couldn't... that you didn't *want* this life anymore. But Pepper, you know as well as I do that you and me—we're stuck together. Maybe not in every way, maybe not the way I wish we were, but I don't think there's ever going to be a time when my stuff doesn't overflow into yours, at least a little bit. And as long as that's not what you want, I'm gonna try my damndest to stop as much of that overflow as I can, to behave as best I can so you don't have to—get on a plane from Japan in the middle of the night to clean up my messes. But I can't stop this. I know it's going to make life harder for you. I know the press is going to get a hold of it eventually, I know the holdings are going to take a hit, I know it's going to be a whirlwind of bullshit for the next few months, and as much as I wish you weren't, you're going to end up in the middle of it at least some of the time, for the same reason you were the first person my lawyers called when this all started. And I'm sorry for that. If it were any other situation, I swear I would work with you on it, I swear. But the kid? The kid is a non-starter. Peter is staying."

Tony braces himself for a fight. But when Pepper opens her mouth, something unexpected emerges from it.

"What's he like?"

"He's—what do you mean?"

"Peter," says Pepper. She wipes her eyes, composes herself. "What's he like? I know you, Tony Stark. There aren't a lot of people who make this kind of impression on you. So... tell me about him."

Tony wishes he could kiss her. He wishes it so hard it takes a few seconds before he can push the impulse aside, gather his thoughts.

"He's... I don't know, Pep. He's smart. He's quiet, but I think that has more to do with what he's been through than who he is, you know? Because when you get him going he's really funny. The kind of funny that catches you by surprise every time. Just clever as hell. And he's kind. Kind in a way I can't even begin to fathom. I think if anyone else in the world had what happened to him happen to them and *then* gotten superpowers, they would have gone after the people who were responsible in a second. Hell, that *is* what I did. But Peter? He just wanted to help the little guys. The guys who couldn't look out for themselves. He's an incredible kid."

"He sounds like it."

Tony nods, slowly. Then shakes his head.

"You should have seen the look on his face when I told him he was gonna live here. You would have thought I told him he was gonna live in northern Russia. He didn't look happy at all, just... tired. Resigned. He doesn't trust me, Pepper. Honestly I don't know if he trusts anyone. I don't blame him, but I don't know what to do about it either. "

Pepper glances around, at the marble countertops, the vaulted ceilings, the state-of-the-art appliances.

"I imagine it's a big change from a warehouse by the river," she says.

Tony barks out a strangled, desperate laugh.

"I'm way out of my league here, Pepper."

He doesn't mean it as a plea, just a statement of fact, but he can hear the desperation in his voice

anyway. Pepper hears it too, and she squeezes his hand.

“You’re gonna be fine, Tony. You’re—”

Something clatters to the floor near the doorway. Pepper and Tony both look around to see Peter standing there, having just knocked Pepper’s suitcase over. He freezes when they look at him, hand outstretched toward the fallen bag, his still-over-long hair in his eyes, his too-large pajamas hanging off him.

“Um,” Peter says. “Hi. Sorry, I was just—sorry.”

Pepper leaps to her feet as Tony straightens up and rounds the island.

“It’s fine,” Tony says before Peter can make a run for it, which he is clearly planning to do. “It’s fine, kid. Sorry, we were just—do you know Pepper? Of course you don’t know Pepper, you’ve never met her. She just stopped by to—”

“Peter.” Pepper’s voice is firm as she steps around Tony; it’s the voice she uses at meetings and important functions, when she wants to cut through Tony’s rambling. She sticks out a hand, which Peter takes, tentative. “It’s really nice to meet you. Come sit down.”

Peter is blushing furiously. Tony can tell he knows who Pepper is, even if he’s never met her, and judging from the combination of mortification and admiration in his expression as he drops her hand, he’s a fan.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Peter mutters. “I was just thinking—”

He cuts himself off abruptly. Tony realizes the kid does that whenever he is about to ask for something, and the revelation makes something deep at his center ache.

Tony falters.

Pepper, on the other hand, says, “You’re not interrupting. Tony and I were just catching up. What can I get you?”

She pulls out a stool, and Peter, still blushing, takes it. But he doesn’t say anything.

Tony is at a loss. He is, as he just told Pepper, out of his league.

But Pepper is never at a loss. She strides over to the fridge as though it is the most natural thing in the world, as though it hasn’t been nearly six months since she lived here and she is frequently called upon to feed the wayward teen adoptees of her ex-boyfriend-slash-boss.

“Well, this is a surprise,” she says. “There’s actually food in here.”

“Happy went shopping.”

“Is any of it ready to eat?” Pepper asks, sifting through cartons of plain broth and uncut fruits and veggies.

“I made eggs,” says Tony.

“You burned the eggs.”

“It was a solid attempt, though.”

“Do you have anything in mind that isn’t blackened beyond all recognition, or—?”

“There are... more eggs.” He gestures to the carton, which contains just one intact egg among the remains of its decimated fellows. “Um—”

“It’s okay.” Peter’s voice is soft, but they still both turn to face him. “I, um. I don’t really like breakfast food anyway.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony sees Pepper’s face fall. She gets her composure back quickly, and Tony works to maintain his own—both in mutual, silent agreement that neither of them should show or mention how gut-wrenching Peter’s expression is. He’s looking at the countertop, hands in his lap—his arms are still peppered with the last of the fading cuts and bruises—lips pressed tightly together, eyes fixed unblinkingly on the marble. It’s obvious he’s trying to keep his own expression neutral, but without the mask to hide behind, Peter’s face is like the news ticker in Times Square—and today’s headline is *shame*.

Pepper steps toward him, lets the fridge shut.

“Is there anything you do like?”

Peter shrugs. Shakes his head. Says, “Sorry. I’m... if I’m in the way, I can just—”

“You’re not—”

Tony starts to step forward, but Pepper puts a gentle hand out, stopping him. She shakes her head at Tony, almost imperceptibly, then sits on one of the stools, near Peter but not next to him.

“You know how I got my job, right?” she says. “I started out as Tony’s personal assistant. And he once put me on a red-eye from Malibu to New York because he wanted fresh bagels first thing in the morning. You’re not going to inconvenience me. And I’m a very hard woman to get in the way of.”

Peter doesn’t look up, but at least he doesn’t keep apologizing for his existence. Pepper hoists on a smile.

“Okay,” she says, “why don’t we go to the living room? I’ll set you up on the couch, and Tony can try to find something to eat that requires very little preparation, how does that sound?”

Peter nods and gets to his feet, but Tony can’t tell if it’s because he wants to or just doesn’t know what else to do. As Pepper guides Peter toward the living room, she casts a glance over her shoulder, and Tony mouths, *Thank you*.

Out loud, he calls after them, “That bagel thing was a long time ago!”

Pepper smiles weakly. Peter doesn’t respond at all

As soon as they’re out of earshot, Tony murmurs, “FRI, how much of that did he hear?”

“Peter woke up when the fire alarm went off.”

“Great. Thanks for the heads up.”

“Sorry, boss.” She pauses. “Kinda seemed like he needed to hear it.”

Tony doesn’t correct her. He actually agrees—he just wishes he’d had the guts to say it to the kid’s face the day before.

In the end Tony settles on soup and toast, the staples of his own childhood sick days—and he only burns the toast a little. He brings them to the living room, along with another handful of meds, and sets these all on the coffee table in front of Peter, who is sitting on the couch while Pepper, in the chair to his right, explains the automated features of the house. She is just finishing up as Tony, tentative, takes the other chair, so the two of them are flanking Peter.

“Do you want to watch a movie?” Pepper asks gently, when Peter doesn’t say anything. “Or I’m pretty sure Tony has video games?”

Peter clenches and unclenches his fists around the fabric of his pajama pants. Tony notices the phone sticking out of one pocket, but Peter doesn’t reach for it, even when it lights up silently.

“I should be helping,” he says quietly. “Everything’s gone wrong because of what I did. The news —”

“Is not something you need to worry about,” says Tony. “I’m taking care of that. You shouldn’t even look at that crap, kid. None of them know what they’re talking about.”

Peter’s knee starts to jiggle. “They don’t believe—they don’t believe what happened... happened.”

“Fuck them. Sorry.” The apology is mostly for Pepper, who throws Tony a look of exasperation. “Sorry. But honestly, kid, f—*forget* them. You’ve got one job, as far as I’m concerned, and that’s just getting better, okay?”

He gestures toward the soup, but Peter doesn’t touch it.

“I messed it all up,” he says. “The Accords—”

“*Don’t matter*,” Tony says. “The fact that you’re even thinking about that at a time like this is blowing my mind here, Pete, and not in a good way.”

“But I’m only—you don’t have to if you don’t—”

“Don’t even say it, kid. I’m Tony Stark. I don’t do anything I don’t want to do.”

Peter’s hands curl up again, stay that way this time.

“I know you feel... bad for what happened,” he says, “but I *wanted* to keep everything secret. Everything that went down was because I lied to you. You don’t... you shouldn’t feel like you have to—”

“Peter. *I want you here*. Not because of the Accords, and not because I feel guilty. Because I like you, kid. And I take care of the people I like. Let me worry about the news, and the stupid government, and all the rest of it. I’m actually pretty good at fixing stuff” —he glances at Pepper— “so why don’t you let me?”

Peter wets his lips, still looking at the soup, still absolutely miserable.

“They hate Spider-Man, Mr. Stark.”

Tony takes a deep breath.

“I’m gonna fix that too.”

Peter doesn’t reply to this. Tony sees the phone light up in his pocket again. Peter doesn’t reach for it.

Tony gets to his feet.

“Seriously, kid,” Tony says, “eat that. And chill out, for now. There’s nothing you have to do. Pep, can you—?”

Tony jerks his head at the hallway.

Pepper looks reluctant to leave Peter alone in the living room, but she gets to her feet anyway. Tony gets her reticence—he’s feeling it himself, especially when he sees the kid scoop a spoonful of soup out of the bowl and immediately drop it back in—but he can already sense that they are walking a very fine line, the pair of them, and he needs to talk to her before they both go tumbling in a direction neither of them want.

“You don’t have to—” Tony says, as soon as they are in the hallway beyond the kitchen, but Pepper cuts him off.

“I want to.”

Tony presses his lips together hard for a drawn-out moment before he trusts himself to reply. Of course Pepper is going to offer to help. Of course he wants to accept, immediately. He forces himself not to.

“This is my mess, Pep,” he says. “Didn’t we just have a talk about me cleaning up after myself?”

Pepper glances over her shoulder again before replying. In the living room, Peter hasn’t even turned on the TV. He’s just sitting there.

“That,” she says, lowering her voice another few notches as she turns back to Tony, steps closer to him, “might actually be the most heartbreaking thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I know. But—”

“He’s not *doing* anything, Tony.”

“He’s tired. He’s sick. He’s—”

“A kid,” Pepper says. “You really weren’t joking.”

Tony shakes his head.

“I want to help,” she says again.

“I can’t ask you to do that, Pepper. This isn’t a deal with Japanese executives. It’s not business. It’s —”

“Your life,” Pepper says. “I know.” She puts a hand on his arm again. “Tony. Look. I’m not offering because... I know you can handle this.” When Tony scoffs, she tightens her grip. “No, I mean it. You might be unpredictable in some ways, but when it comes to your team, you’re the most reliable person I know. I know you’ll figure this out. But I don’t think I should leave. Did you see the way he tensed up when you sat next to him?”

Tony did. He’s noticed it every time he gets within ten feet of the kid. Every time it makes his heart tense up, too.

“You think it’s because I’m—”

“A man? Yes. And Iron Man. And Tony Stark. And his hero. It might be good to have a counterpoint to all that. Someone a little less... overwhelming. For backup.”

Tony sighs. “I really thought I was done asking you to play backup for all my crazy, Potts.”

Pepper squeezes his arm again. “You’re not asking. I’m offering. And... in the grand scheme of all the time I’ve known you, this might be among the least crazy things I’ve done.”

For the first time, Tony chances a smile. “Still mad about the bagels?”

“Yes. It’s right up there with getting kidnapped by a supervillain.”

“Oh yeah. That was... not great.”

Pepper smiles too.

“Should we get to work, Mr. Stark?”

“We should, Miss Potts.”

He hesitates just a second—then sticks out a hand. Pepper shakes it.

It might be less than Tony has wanted these last few months, but it is so much more than he ever let himself hope for.

Partners.

Tony is no longer alone.

It doesn’t take long for the benefits of having Pepper Potts back at his immediate side to become clear: by late morning, the only bit of luck any of them has had these past few days runs out.

“New development in the bizarre Spider-Man case. Tony Stark spotted leaving Midtown Memorial Hospital with what appears to be an adolescent boy.”

Tony, sitting on the couch, thanks whatever gods remain that Peter excused himself to take a shower some time ago when FRIDAY pulls the news alert up on the main screen. He sits up, glances at Pepper—who is busy in the kitchen, making more food ahead of time so it’s not lost to Tony’s ministrations later—and lowers the volume slightly so Peter won’t hear.

“Now, this remains officially unconfirmed,” says the male news anchor, who is barely managing to conceal his giddy delight at this new salacious detail, “but sources close to Steven Westcott, the man arrested in connection to the Spider-Man case, say the boy matches the description of one of Westcott’s former foster children. Because the boy is a minor we cannot release his name, but we have received details that the child in question ran away from Westcott’s home nearly six months ago, begging the question, *How did Tony Stark find him?*”

The shot widens, revealing the entire news panel. An underfed, bouffant-haired blonde woman doesn’t hesitate to jump in.

“I think the whole thing stinks, David,” she says. “Tony Stark’s little BFF gets accused of assault

and suddenly the one kid Westcott *didn't* have success with appears out of nowhere? You want to know what I think? I think Stark is in desperate need of someone who can corroborate his story that Spider-Man is *such a nice guy*, rather than the unhinged vigilante we all know him to be!”

“What evidence do you have that Spider-Man is unhinged?” a different woman, a brunette, counters. “What if the reason we’re seeing this mystery kid now is because he’s the one making the accusations against Westcott? If that’s the case, isn’t it possible Spider-Man *was* just trying to help?”

“Then why are we only seeing the kid after the fact?” the blonde counters. “And for that matter, why would Spider-Man attack Westcott while he was eating dinner with his kids instead of calling the police? I’ll tell you why. Because the whole story reeks of a cover-up. We are talking about the man who lets criminals go on a frequent basis, who, need I remind you, *blew up a ferry full of people* last week, and who now has escalated beyond the point where anyone can control him, including Tony Stark. He’s a madman who attacks random civilians. He’s a menace. And if Spider-Man really is innocent in all this, then where is he? Why hasn’t he turned himself in, or even tried to give his side of the story? Answer me that, Sharon.”

“I think what I’m more interested in is what Stark is planning to do with this kid,” says the man. “I mean, can you even imagine Tony Stark trying to *parent* some teenage del—”

The TV goes blank. When Tony turns around, Pepper is standing behind him with her arms crossed over her chest, phone in one hand.

“I’ll take care of that,” she says. “You go check on him.”

Pepper is, of course, right. Peter’s frenzied guilt this morning was evidence he’s keeping up with the news, and though Tony briefly considered blocking his internet access, to spare him some of the nastier comments regarding Spider-Man, it was an idea quickly dismissed. Peter’s been kept in the dark about his own life far too many times—Tony’s not going to make it worse by contributing to the withholding. And there’s no way in hell he’s going to take that phone away. That leaves just one option: sucking it up, and dealing with the fallout.

He’s midway down the hall, heading toward the second bedroom, where he can still hear the sounds of the shower running even though Peter disappeared nearly an hour ago, when his own phone rings.

He pulls it out of his pocket and glances at it, out of habit more than any intent to actually answer—he thanks the heavens, for the thousandth time since that morning, for Pepper, because he has precisely zero energy for non-essential human interaction at the moment—but stops short of pressing the reject button.

It’s Ned Leeds.

Tony answers.

“This is Tony Stark.”

There’s a fumbling sound, like Ned has just dropped the phone. Another as he picks it up.

“Uhhhh, hi,” he says. “Is this, um. Is this, uhhhh. Is this Tony Stark?”

“You’re really gonna test the limits of my ability to not be sarcastic here, aren’t you Ned?”

“You know my name? You know my name. Tony Stark knows my name?”

"I've texted you. You've texted me. We're pals now. So what can I do for you?"

"Uhhh."

It's actually a little endearing, how easily Tony has broken this teenage nerd's brain. He can see why this is Peter's best friend, and he hasn't even met the kid. But Tony still has things to take care of, so he's a little relieved when there is another fumbling sound and another, female voice takes over.

"Peter isn't responding," says the girl. "That number you gave us is a dud."

Tony's heart sinks a little, remembering how Peter's phone was lighting up silently that morning. The number isn't a dud. Peter just isn't answering.

Still, he doesn't let the small dismay this new complication has inspired show in his voice when he responds.

"Wonder twin number two, I presume? And your name is...?"

"Michelle." A pause. "MJ."

"Well, Michelle-comma-MJ, last time I checked there's a little something kids need after they intentionally crash multi-billion dollar planes, and it's called sleep. Peter's just resting. I'm sure he'll call you when he's up for it."

There's another pause. This one goes on so long Tony isn't entirely sure MJ hasn't hung up on him. He's just about to check the connection when she finally says,

"We just want to know if he's okay."

Tony deflates.

"He is. And he isn't. Look, I know you guys want to help, but why don't you let me take the reins for a little while? I promise, I'll make sure he gets in touch. And I'll keep you updated in the meantime."

Another pause.

"Okay," says MJ.

"Okay," Tony agrees.

A final, even more awkward pause, wherein Tony isn't sure if he is supposed to say something or hang up.

MJ hangs up first.

Tony tucks the phone away, and knocks on Peter's door. When there is no response he pushes it open, tentative.

Peter is once again propped in the chair, but instead of pajamas he is wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt that says "If You Believe in Telekinesis, Raise My Hand." The room is dark, the curtains drawn, but Peter is staring at the window as though they are not.

The sickly tang of stomach bile hangs in the air, coming from the bathroom, the door to which stands slightly ajar. Tony remembers what Dr. Brainerd said about Peter having trouble keeping

food down, and the dismay from a moment ago redoubles—Peter barely touched his soup and toast, which must mean his stomach is all kinds of messed up—but he refrains from mentioning it as he slowly enters the room.

“Hey, Pete. Okay if I come in?”

Peter nods without looking at him. His hair hangs in his face in damp curls—clean, at least. Still too long.

Tony enters, sits at the very edge of the bed.

“You doing okay there, kid?”

Peter nods again, continues to stare out the window.

“Saw the news, I take it?” Tony nods at the phone, which is perched on Peter’s right knee.

A third nod. Then, softly, “I’m sorry they’re saying those things about you.”

“News always says bad stuff about me,” says Tony. “I’m sorry they’re saying it about *you*, kid. It’s gonna blow over eventually. Pepper’s working on our angle now. She’s good; they might drag you for a while, but as much privacy as you can get, she’ll make sure you get it.”

“Okay.”

Peter starts to fist his hands in the knees of his sweatpants, just like he did that morning. His knee starts to jiggle. The phone falls to the floor. Peter retrieves it immediately, blushes as he straightens. Stops fidgeting.

Tony sighs.

“Hey. Peter. Can we talk for a sec?”

At last, Peter brings his gaze around, looking wary. He nods.

“Okay. Look, kid, I know this probably isn’t... ideal. I don’t know if I’d be anyone’s first choice in—in places to live, to be honest, but I just want you to know that it’s okay if it’s not okay. I’m not expecting this to be easy, or for it to feel right right away. If you’re... if you’re not happy, that’s fine. I’ve been unhappy often enough to know that sometimes the best thing you can do is just let yourself be unhappy. So if that’s what you need—”

A single tear falls. Peter wipes it hastily, looks away again, embarrassed.

“Sorry,” says Tony, “did I—?”

“No,” says Peter. “I just... that’s something... my uncle used to say that. That it was okay to be... to not be happy. I just haven’t heard it in a long time.” He swallows. “I’m sorry. It’s not that I’m not grateful, or... I just don’t know how to...”

“I get it,” Tony says. “Really, I do. I’m not coming into this with any expectations, Pete, I mean it.”

Peter’s lower lip starts to tremble. He doesn’t look back at Tony, or say anything, but Tony can sense this is not the time to make an exit, so he casts around for something to say himself, finally lands on, “What was your uncle like?”

And—shit. The uncle was a terrible choice, apparently, because at this Peter can no longer hold back the tears. They start to pour down his face in two continuous streams, and no matter how many times Peter swipes at them, he can't get them to stop. Tony is just about to open his mouth to retract, when Peter cuts across him.

“Sorry.” He digs the heels of his hands into his eyes, takes a shuddering breath. “Sorry, I don't know why I'm losing it like this. It's been—he died a long time ago, it's just... no one's ever asked me about him before.”

Of course Peter is crying. The entire time since his uncle died he's been in survival mode. He never got to mourn.

Tony might not know what he's been doing the last three days—hell, he might not know what he's doing now—but he does know a thing or two about mourning.

“It's okay,” he says. “You don't have to be sorry.”

“I think—” Peter takes a hiccuping breath, lowers his hands. “I think he really loved me, you know? And I—I just really miss him. I really really miss him.”

Now Peter looks at Tony, wearing the same expression he wore in the hospital, when he told him why he ran away. Not embarrassed anymore. Just hoping Tony will understand.

“Do you need me to leave you alone?” Tony asks.

Peter shakes his head.

“Okay if I just stay with you for a while?”

Slowly, Peter nods. He draws his knees to his chest, tears still falling, and he doesn't say anything for a long time.

And Tony, true to his word, just stays.

What We Deserve

The week that follows reminds Tony of nothing so much as that long trek across the desert, right after he escaped from the cave. Trudging across an iron-hot and endless stretch of wasteland: how could anything be so mundane and so dangerous at the same time? But that's exactly how it feels, holed up together in the apartment, avoiding the press and trying to figure out what, exactly, it means to be Peter's guardian.

Pepper takes a leave of absence from work, makes up the guest bedroom, and hunkers down with them. It doesn't exactly help the company's interests, but, as Pepper says when Peter apologizes for it for what feels like the hundredth time on the second day, the company has taken hits before—it's what companies do. This, she insists, is the closest thing to a vacation she's had in years. She does not mention that she's spending the majority of that so-called vacation having whispered conversations in corners with reporters and shareholders, negating the rumors that Tony has disappeared because he's taken Spider-Man into hiding (though this is technically true), that he's gone crazy in the wake of the dissolution of the Avengers (possibly a little true), and that he's bribing this poor kid of Westcott's to save his own ass (categorically and undeniably false).

What Pepper has not denied, however, is that Tony has indeed taken that kid in.

"This is a terrible situation for everyone involved," she told a CNN panel over the phone, the evening the grainy photos of Tony leaving the hospital, Peter in tow, surfaced on the internet. "Spider-Man's hands were tied by a system that had failed this boy repeatedly; he felt that getting the authorities involved would drag the process out and potentially leave three children in danger. Mr. Stark doesn't necessarily condone Spider-Man's methods, but given the choice between saving children from a child molester and leaving them in his hands, I think we can all agree Spider-Man took the same action any reasonable person would have."

"Miss Potts, are you seriously suggesting that it's the responsibility of superheroes to ignore due process?" the newscaster countered. "Isn't that exactly what the Sokovia Accords are supposed to prevent? What right did Spider-Man have to be judge, jury and executioner in Westcott's case?"

"Don, *nobody* has the full details of what went down that night. For all we know—"

"Spider-Man has them. And yet he's been persona non grata ever since. Why hasn't he come forward to defend himself, if everything is so clear-cut?"

"How about the lynch mob calling for his head?" Pepper shot back.

"What I'd like to know," said one of the female anchors, cutting across her co-host, "is if the rumors surrounding Westcott's runaway are true. Has Tony Stark really taken this boy in?"

"First of all, he's not Westcott's anything. Let's call him what he is: the real hero in this story. Spider-Man might have been the one who put Westcott in jail, but this boy is the one who was brave enough to come forward. And I might remind you others have done the same since."

"One other," the woman corrected. "And only after the fact. And is that a yes on Tony Stark taking the boy in, Miss Potts?"

"Yes," Pepper said, "which is why Mr. Stark is asking for the same privacy anyone would hope for in a time of family crisis."

Thank God for Pepper Potts.

They might not be able to keep Peter out of this completely, but they can at least insert him in a way that shows him for what he really is.

Hero. Family.

But if Peter recognizes Pepper's efforts, it's impossible to tell. When he isn't apologizing for the enormous burden he has created for the pair of them by being alive, that first week, he remains almost entirely inscrutable. Tony hoped their shared moment in Peter's bedroom on that first day might signify an opening of the floodgates—might help Peter recognize that Tony was safe, if not, yet, totally comfortable. But it seems to have had the opposite effect: Peter spends most of his time locked in his room, emerging only when Pepper coaxes him out to eat. He *does* eat, at least, but it doesn't take too long to realize he is walking a fine line: consuming just exactly the right amount so that Pepper and Tony won't say anything at the end of the meal, and never a bite more.

The first time Tony sees him pocket a granola bar in the kitchen—when he thinks neither of them are looking—he wants to tear his own hair out. No—he wants to take the entire pantry and transplant it to the kid's room, nail it to the floor next to the bed Peter never sleeps in—though he tries to hide that too, moving the blankets off the floor and back to the mattress every morning, perhaps unaware that FRIDAY always lets Tony know—and give the kid exclusive access, because he can't stand the idea Peter thinks something that should be as easy as food is something to be rationed, hoarded, hidden.

But Tony doesn't. He doesn't call the kid out on it either, and doesn't mention the pile of snacks in the back of Peter's closet he discovers there when he's putting more clothes—delivered courtesy of Happy, who has now tilted into the overkill Tony was expecting initially, and drops off shopping bags full of things he thinks Peter might enjoy on a near-daily basis—away.

"It's going to take time," says Pepper, when Tony brings it up to her that night. "I don't like it either, but I feel like if we push too hard right away we're going to scare him off."

Tony knows she's right. But sitting around doing nothing has never been part of his rather considerable skill set. So he goes for a stealthier intervention: he takes to carrying the bland protein bars Dr. Brainerd suggested in his pocket, presses them into the kid's hand whenever he's not expecting it, or lobbs them at him when he's watching TV or fiddling with his phone. Peter always catches them, always looks slightly surprised—but never refuses. And Tony never says anything. Never orders the kid to eat them, or even mentions that he's doing it. Never lets his gaze linger long enough to see if Peter pockets them or puts them in his mouth, because that isn't the point.

When Peter's stomach starts to settle—when he no longer "takes" hour-long showers to cover the sound of him throwing up—Tony switches the bars out for bags of chips, rows of cookies, and those packets of gas-station gummy worms he saw in Karen's footage. Tony pretends not to notice how Peter's eyes go shiny the first time he tosses him the latter.

The food is one thing, though. None of it is easy, but some of it simply doesn't seem to have any sort of solution, not even of the way-less-than-I-wish-I-could-do-but-still-something variety.

For instance: Ned and MJ call again that Friday.

"He hasn't said *anything*," says Ned. "He hasn't even texted to say he's alive."

It's a video call; he and MJ are sitting in what Tony is guessing is her bedroom, judging from the posters of long-dead feminists plastering her walls. Ned is round-faced and entirely too innocent-looking to be dealing with something of this magnitude, an impression that is reinforced by the fact that his star-struck stutter from their earlier call has completely disappeared, replaced by a look of

abject misery. He's got dark circles under his eyes and can't seem to stop fidgeting; his voice is just short of a plea.

MJ, on the other hand, sits like she's made of brick. She doesn't move at all—might not even be breathing—just eyes Tony from under a sheath of dark, curly hair.

"I promise, he's alive," Tony says. He does not say that zombies are also technically alive—or at least undead—and that Peter currently resembles nothing so much as one. "Maybe just a little—ah—overwhelmed."

He suppresses a flinch. *They* are clearly overwhelmed, and it's not like they're any more equipped to handle this than Peter is. They're still kids, too.

Ned lowers his head. MJ says nothing.

"Look—" Tony begins.

"Will you tell him we're sorry?" Ned cuts across him, voice like a whip. "Um." He lowers it.

"Sorry. I just meant... if he's mad at us, will you tell him we get it? And we're just... we're really sorry."

Ned's lower lip is trembling. Tony looks at MJ, who is staring at her hands, face unreadable.

"Is that what you think this is about?"

MJ and Ned glance at one another.

"I thought something was weird about Skip," says MJ. "And then when he disappeared, I *knew* something was weird. But I never said anything."

"I never even asked," says Ned. "I'm supposed to be his best friend and when he started acting all whacked-out and crazy I didn't even ask." His breath catches. "I *liked* going over to his house. Skip—he was always really nice to me. I never even thought... and then when I found out he was Spider-Man I just thought it was cool. I asked him to come to a *party*. I didn't ask if—if—"

"Stop right there." Both kids snap their heads up at the fierceness in Tony's voice. It's the same tone he used when Peter tried to apologize for not doing more to stop Westcott sooner. "Jeez, you three really are birds of a feather, aren't you? Look, I'm gonna say this really clearly and I want you to memorize it. Store it in your weird, outsize brains and review it whenever you start to get a case of the guilts, okay? *This isn't your fault*. Westcott did exactly what manipulators do—he lied his ass off and didn't give a shit who he hurt as long as he didn't get caught. He managed to trick me too, so you can bet your asses he was really good at it. You don't get to take responsibility. No way."

Ned shuts his mouth. MJ, on the other hand, says quietly, "It doesn't matter if it *was* our fault. It just matters if Peter thinks it was."

Tony wants to say that Peter doesn't. He even opens his mouth with that very response on his tongue, but he doesn't say it. Even though he would bet his suits that *blame* isn't the reason Peter is avoiding his friends, he doesn't know it for sure. Because the only time Peter says more than two words is when he's apologizing.

It's time, Tony decides, to get a little more proactive.

Proactivity, however, backfires.

He waits until dinner. Mealtimes are the only part of the day Peter doesn't spend holed up in his room, and Tony doesn't want to accost him in there: ever since that first day, if Tony enters the bedroom Peter turns into a spring so tightly wound it's a miracle he doesn't start ricocheting off the walls and ceiling. Also, Pepper is there at dinner—she has made a point of getting off the phone whenever it is time to eat, so she can join them—and as usual, she was correct: Peter is definitely more relaxed around her than he is with just Tony. Peter lets her touch his shoulder when she sets his plate in front of him, doesn't flinch away from it like he would if Tony tried the same—even lets his gaze linger on her hand as she withdraws, like he wishes she hadn't taken it away so soon.

Tony takes this encouraging sign to mean this is a good moment to broach the subject.

"Hey, kid," he says, "we need to talk."

The change is instantaneous. The color flees Peter's cheeks. He drops his fork with a clatter—immediately dives down to retrieve it, but mostly, Tony is sure, to cover the brief terror that appeared in his eyes at Tony's proclamation. Like he has spent the last five days just waiting for the other shoe to drop, and is certain this is it. When he straightens back up, fork in hand, he has to put his hands in his lap, because when he puts them on the table the whole thing rattles.

And Tony chokes on his words.

"Haircut," he says stupidly.

Pepper is staring at him. Peter is staring at his plate.

"Haircut," Tony says again. "You need a haircut. Sorry, Pete, but you look like the upper half of a sasquatch. I'm surprised they didn't sell that photo of me taking you home to the *National Enquirer*. You know—'Tony Stark recruits Bigfoot.' Or something." Pepper is giving him a look. The look says *Please, please shut up*. Tony cuts it short. "So I'm pulling rank."

"Okay," says Peter.

It's pretty much all he says these days.

Pepper reaches across the table, squeezes Peter's forearm.

"I'll do it," she says. "I used to cut Tony's hair all the time, back in his bagel days."

"Yep," says Tony, "that was—what? Two thousand two? So I hope you like frosted tips and gel spikes, kid."

That actually gets a tiny laugh out of Peter. But when he sticks his fork into Pepper's chicken piccata, he can't quite hide the fact his hand is still shaking.

"So that was impressively embarrassing," says Pepper while Tony loads the dishwasher that evening, "even for you."

She is looking through the kitchen drawers for supplies for this impromptu haircut. Peter is in the shower. Tony makes a noise like he is being strangled.

“This is the most harrowing week of my life,” he says. “Seriously, feel free to put me on a helicopter and drop me back in the desert or—or stab me in the heart with some pure palladium at any moment.”

“Not funny,” says Pepper. She’s found the scissors. “Want to tell me what that was all about?”

Tony sighs. “He’s not talking to his friends, Pepper. It just... didn’t occur to me until I’d opened my fat trap how much of an accusation it might seem if I called him out on it.”

Pepper only nods, spreading a tablecloth Tony didn’t even realize he owned underneath one of the kitchen stools. “He’s still not really doing anything, is he?”

“No,” Tony agrees. “He isn’t.”

“That? The not doing anything? Might make it hard to imagine just... going back to who he was. With his friends, I mean. Especially if he feels like he doesn’t have anything to replace the old Peter.”

“I don’t want him to feel like he has to *do* anything, though. I want him to just—do whatever he wants, for once. You know, granted it’s something inside this apartment. Where the stupid press can’t get him.”

“Yeah,” says Pepper, “I’m thinking we might want to reassess that strategy.”

“What, cut him loose in the city?”

“Reassess, not go to the opposite extreme. Think about it, Tony. How’s he been spending the last six months?”

“As Spider-Man. Which you know—”

“Right. Two hobbies—saving the world and staying alive. And now we’ve gone and stuck him on the top floor of a New York high rise and told him to go crazy—so long as he doesn’t do the one thing he knows how to do. Survival isn’t a problem. Spider-Man isn’t an option. He isn’t ready for school, and neither are we. So... what *is* he going to do?”

“I’m open to suggestions.”

Pepper tests a smile, patient and a little sad.

“I don’t know either,” she says. “But think about how you felt when you got back from Afghanistan. How hard it was to go back to normal.”

“I never did,” says Tony. “I just holed myself off from the world and built my suit. So unless you’re suggesting I take this opportunity to teach Peter how to build weapons of mass destruction —”

He cuts himself off, because he can hear Peter shuffling down the hallway toward them, coming to finally receive his much-needed haircut.

Pepper hasn't lost her touch in the past fifteen years. The haircut brightens Peter's entire face. Makes him look younger. Makes him look more like the handsome kid he would have been if all the crap that came his way had never come. The kid he *will* be, hopefully, when he's gained a few pounds and lost some of whatever it is that still makes him feel like he hasn't got the right to just be a human person on this planet.

Peter even smiles when he sees it.

And Tony, once again, shelves the hard stuff for another time.

Every night after Peter has gone to sleep, Pepper and Tony stay up. They stand in the kitchen and share a single glass of wine and speak in lowered voices about whatever has transpired over the course of the day. Pepper talks about the news cycle, the new rumors about Spider-Man, the angry calls from shareholders. Tony talks about the research he has done on trauma and teenagers and whatever else he can think of that seems like it might be relevant—his own way of filling the days so he doesn't go totally stir-crazy.

Every night when they are finished—when Pepper straightens up and runs her hands through her hair and announces that she's tired—Tony expects, just for a second, that she will turn left down the hallway, toward their bedroom. Every night, Pepper turns right instead, and heads for the guest room.

Tony pretends this doesn't bother him. He pretends it is enough.

A blue light pulses. A beacon, drawing him out of sleep.

FRIDAY is flashing her silent alarm.

Tony sits up blearily, raises the lights. The silent alarm is meant for nightmares—a non-intrusive, gentle way of waking him when he cannot wake himself. But Tony wasn't having a nightmare, he doesn't think. His heart isn't pounding, anyway. He isn't covered in a cold sweat.

"Boss," says FRIDAY softly, before Tony can ask. "It's Peter."

Tony is out of bed and down the hall before she can say anything else.

Now his heart is pounding. The cold sweat has arrived. But he regains his senses, just a little bit, the second before he bursts into Peter's room.

If Peter was in danger, FRIDAY wouldn't have used the silent alarm. She would have brought out the big guns. Which means Tony should make sure *not* to bring out his. Not until he knows what's going on.

Instead of kicking down the door like the Terminator, therefore, Tony merely opens it.

“Kid?” he says, voice barely above a whisper. “Kid, you awake?”

He takes a step into the room.

And immediately flies back as a pair of feet connect with his chest.

Tony hits the wall, back of his head jarring hard enough he sees stars, right elbow punching a hole in the drywall. He slides to the floor, blinking and trying to see past the lights bursting in his vision and—

“Oh my god. Oh my god, Mr. Stark, are you okay?”

For a second Tony is sure he must be concussed, because Peter’s voice seems to be coming from above him. But it’s not his head—as FRIDAY raises the lights, Tony looks up just in time to see Peter, pale as hot embers, drop from the ceiling to land in a crouch in front of him.

“I’m so sorry,” he says. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know it was you. Are you—can you—?”

The kid’s panicking, shaking all over. So even though Tony can feel the mother of all goose eggs blooming on the back of his skull, as well as a few spectacular bruises on his chest and elbow, he uses the wall to begin to push himself to his feet.

Peter offers a hand. Tony takes it, straightens. As soon as he’s upright, Peter drops it.

“I thought—I thought—”

“You thought the shadowy figure entering your bedroom in the middle of the night might constitute a threat,” Tony says. “I probably should have thought that one through. It’s good, kid. My bad.”

“I hurt you,” Peter says. “I couldn’t—”

“It’s fine,” says Tony, only lying a little bit. “I’ve taken worse hits sparring with Black Widow, to both body and ego. Please don’t worry about it, I’m begging you.”

But Peter is, apparently, worried about it.

“I could have killed you,” he says. “I could have—”

Thankfully, Pepper appears at that moment, wearing pajamas and a look of alarm.

“What happened? Is everyone okay?”

“I’m fine,” says Tony, cutting across both Peter and Pepper, who has just noticed the hole in the wall, and the pile of blankets on the floor, and is about to mention them. “Peter, on the other hand, is in desperate need of some hot chocolate. Let’s go to the kitchen, come on.”

Ten minutes later, the three of them are seated around the kitchen island, all clutching mugs of hot chocolate—Tony and Pepper mostly because they know Peter will not touch his unless they do. Without being asked, Pepper retrieved an ice pack from the freezer, slipped it to Tony when Peter wasn’t looking. Tony uses his knee to press it into his elbow while he watches Peter, who is staring into the depths of his mug like he hopes it will turn into a black hole and swallow him.

“That’s never happened to me before,” he says. Looks up at Tony. “That was the first time, I swear.”

“Take a breath, kid,” says Tony. “And take a sip. Nobody got hurt.”

“You could have. I could have really hurt you.”

“You *didn’t*.”

Peter’s next inhale judders like flag in high wind.

“I was having a nightmare.”

It’s the most personal information Peter has offered since he and Tony talked about his uncle nearly a week ago. Pepper recognizes this too—her hands tighten on her own mug—but neither she nor Tony acknowledge it. Just wait to see if Peter will go on.

“I never had them before,” he says. “Not like—not like that. Bad dreams in the warehouse, sometimes, but this was” —he swallows— “this was way worse.”

Tony glances at Pepper. Then at the clock above the oven. It’s 4:30am, but none of them are getting back to sleep right now, so Tony gets to his feet.

“Get dressed, kid,” he says, “we’re going on a road trip.”

“Chin up, Pete. This isn’t *Harry and the Hendersons*. You no longer resemble any half of a sasquatch, so there’s no danger I’m going to release you into the woods, don’t worry.”

Peter, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, has been watching the city shrink behind them as the sun slowly rises over it as though he expects Tony to do just that. But at this, he turns to face Tony for the first time since they sneaked out of their building some time ago.

“*Harry and the Hendersons*?” he says. “Is that a thing?”

“Only one of the greatest movies of all time. But let’s save your cinematic re-education for another time, kid. We’re almost there.”

He nods through the windshield and Peter turns his attention forward just in time to see the Avengers facility come winding into sight through the trees. Peter sits up a little straighter—seemingly involuntarily, because he glances at Tony out of the corner of his eye as though he expects him to reprimand this rare display of interest—maybe even eagerness.

Instead, Tony says, “It’s been a little barren lately. We have a regular staff, but they’re off on weekends, and since most of the usual residents are currently headlining America’s Most Wanted, I think we should be solid. We’re just going to the lab anyway.”

“The lab?” Peter whips around to look at Tony. “What lab? *Your* lab?”

Tony resists the usual snarky reply. “That’s the one. You said you were in robotics club at school, right? How familiar are you with nanotech?”

An hour later, Peter is seated on one side of Tony's workbench, looking like someone has just punched down the fourth wall on his life, revealing some heretofore-undreamed-of dimension of reality. He's holding himself carefully, elbows tucked into his sides, shoulders hunched up around his ears, almost as though he's afraid he will start inexplicably flailing about, crashing into the fleet of vintage cars, ruining Tony's Iron-Man equipment. Tony does not tell him that he would gladly sacrifice everything in the room if Peter would stop acting like he's a recent parolee and Tony the parole officer who could send him back to prison at any moment. He just drops the prototype casing for the most recent version of his suit in front of Peter on the table.

"That's the problem," he says. "The nanites are actually pretty solid, and a hell of a lot more versatile than your standard one-size-fits all Iron Man suit. But I can't get them to fit in the damn casing. And reducing the quantity isn't an option, since, you know—"

"You need the armor to be dense enough to actually protect you from attackers," says Peter, picking up the casing and turning it over in his hands. "But probably also light enough you can carry it on a day-to-day basis, right?"

Now Tony has to work to cover his delight: this is the most Peter has said all week. The most he's said without verging on a breakdown since the hospital.

Slowly, Tony lowers himself to sit across from Peter, settles a bit when Peter doesn't flinch—just continues to turn the casing over, examining every facet, every edge.

"Yep," says Tony. "And preferably subtle enough that Pepper won't kill me if I show up wearing it at a board meeting. I'm open to ideas."

And Tony is in luck: Peter has a few.

For the first few hours in the lab, Tony remains on edge. He doesn't want to draw attention to how stark a change this morning has wrought in Peter, afraid that if he calls it out he will break the spell. But it *is* stark. Within the first hour, Peter has gone from a hunched, nervous shell of a kid to one who is bursting with enthusiasm and who, once Tony gets him going, talks almost non-stop. Most of the time he's not even talking *to* Tony—he's just processing his ideas out loud, running through the pros and cons, keeping what works and discarding what doesn't without any self-consciousness about being correct the first go-around. It's actually kind of thrilling for Tony, who generally works the same way—though perhaps his dialogue is a bit more of the internal variety—but rarely encounters anyone who is comfortable enough to just work through a problem in front of him. Everyone he works with is always trying to impress him. Peter is just trying to solve the problem.

This is the Peter Tony knows from the Spider-Man calls. The one who was with him in Germany. The one he wants to get back on a full-time basis.

By late morning Peter is no longer self-conscious about breaking anything. He flits around the lab, grabbing tools at Tony's direction and sometimes at his own, utilizing the supercomputer as though he's been doing it his whole life, yet still insisting on sketching out his more complex ideas on a pad of notebook paper—snorting when Tony comments that he's graduated from sasquatch to caveman. It's such a relief, seeing him this relaxed, that Tony makes a mistake—he looks away,

lets himself get caught up in his own work, and doesn't realize something is wrong for a full five minutes after the sounds of Peter clattering around the lab disappear.

When Tony does finally look up, thinking the kid might have slipped into the restroom, he finds Peter standing over server in the corner, on top of which, still plugged in, is his Spider-Man suit.

He's not saying anything. He's not even touching it. Just looking down and not moving, lips pressed tightly together.

Slowly, Tony gets to his feet and crosses the lab, trying to intuit how close he can get to the kid without violating his comfort zone. Peter's shoulders are back up around his ears.

"I should have put that away," says Tony.

Peter shakes his head, doesn't say anything.

"You're gonna get it back, you know that, right? We just... have to wait for things to settle. Once Westcott goes to trial and everyone sees he's guilty—"

"People will still think whatever they're going to think," Peter interrupts. "It's okay. That part, I mean. Spider-Man wasn't... I never wanted people to think he— *I* was great, or whatever. I just wanted them to let me help." He looks up. "Mr. Stark, I don't even know how to be a person anymore. How am I supposed to be Spider-Man?"

Tony takes a deep breath, holds it in his lungs just long enough he can feel the strain in his ribcage, lets it out.

"Come on, kid. Let's grab something to eat."

They sit in the main kitchen, which Tony locks down in case of any stragglers or over-eager staff, and look out over the sweeping front lawn while they eat thick turkey sandwiches—one of the few things Tony can make without absolutely mutilating it.

Peter is withdrawing again. It's not as bad as it has been, but Tony can see it in the way he avoids looking anywhere but the window, in the way his knee starts to jiggle ever-so-slightly the longer they sit in silence. But Peter shows no sign of breaking that silence. So Tony takes it upon himself.

"My nightmares were always worst when Pepper was there," he says.

Peter looks at him sharply, surprised. Tony nods.

"After New York was when they got really bad. That wormhole? Wasn't as neat as it looked on the news. Mostly I just avoided sleeping, because when I did... anyway, it was weird as hell, because all I wanted back then was to be around her, but every time I got into bed with her the dreams got worse. It drove me nuts, kid. I didn't understand it."

"Was it... was she doing something?"

"Yes," says Tony. "If by 'something' you mean being more supportive and understanding than I ever understood. Or deserved."

Peter sets his sandwich down, bemusement written in the crease of his brow.

Tony sets his down too.

“For a while,” he says, “every aspect of my life felt dangerous. I had seen something so much bigger than I was, something that felt like it could come back and swallow everything and any moment, and so I devoted ninety-nine percent of my time to making sure that couldn’t happen. Pepper was the one percent that still felt... safe. It took me a while to realize it, kid, but the reason the nightmares got worse when we were together was because that was the only time I was relaxed enough to have them.”

Peter’s frown deepens; he still doesn’t understand.

Tony sighs.

“Peter,” he says, “you’ve been fighting for the last year and a half. Ever since your uncle died. All your energy has gone toward staying alive, and when that’s the case, there’s usually not a lot of room for the other stuff. For processing. It makes sense the nightmares are happening now. It’s the first time you’ve had space for them.”

Peter’s hands start to tremble. He twists them in his lap to hide it, looks down at them.

“It’s,” he says.

Cuts himself off.

Tony puts his hands on the table, leans forward.

“Kid,” he says, “you can say it. I know you don’t believe me yet, so I’ll say it again: I’m not going to turf you. No matter what, you’re here for the long haul now.”

“But that’s just *it*,” says Peter. “I *do* know that. I know you’re not going to kick me out. I know you and Miss Potts want me. I know it, but it’s like... no matter how much I know it, I can’t *believe* it. I’m trying, I am, but I can’t. And even when I start to think I believe it, I think of all the other things that could happen, all the other ways—”

He stops talking abruptly.

“All the other ways things could go wrong?”

Peter nods.

“Well, let me clear a few things up on that front. My very angry lawyers have spent the last week setting up a line of succession for your guardianship that’s so long you’re going to have a curfew until you’re eighty. If anything happens to me you go to Pepper. If anything happens to Pepper, you go to Happy. If anything happens to Happy, Rhodey’s right there to step in. And by the way, every one of those people was more than happy to sign on—even Rhodey, and he’s never even seen your face. He just likes your movie references. At least that’s what he said when I asked him. And in the unlikely event that all of us disappear—or, you know, you turn eighteen—you are now in possession of a trust fund large enough to fill the Mariana Trench. You’re not going to be on the streets ever again, Peter. I can promise that much.”

“You’re... you’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Dead serious. What do you think I’ve been doing all week? Playing tiddlywinks?”

A ghost of a smile on Peter's face. "What century is it, Mr. Stark?"

"Irrelevant," says Tony. "When you're as rich as I am, it's whatever century you want it to be." Peter's smile widens. Tony meets it with one of his own. "My point, kid, is that you can and should feel safe. But you should also know that if you start to feel—nightmarey, that's not something to be ashamed of. It's actually something we should expect. Things sometimes feel worse before they feel better. Got it?"

Peter's smile fades. But he nods.

"And if you wanna talk about it—"

"I don't. If—if that's okay."

Tony nods. "It's okay. For now. But... kid, there are a few other things I think we need to address."

Peter looks at his hands again. "The food?"

"That's a big one. You need to eat, kid. You probably need to be eating about twice as much as a normal person, but I would settle for normal teenager amounts at this point. With your metabolism —"

"I know," says Peter. "I know. It's not like I *want* to not eat. I get hungry. I get hungry, like, *all* the time. But when I try to..."

He scrunches his nose, mouth shut tight, like whatever he's trying to say has a foul taste.

"No judgment, kid, remember?"

Peter unscrunches. Takes a breath. Tries again.

"Sometimes... I get this... voice."

"Like a voice in your head?"

Peter nods. Then shakes his head. "I don't know. It's a voice and it's not a voice. It's a feeling. Like if I don't save... if I don't behave a certain way, things are going to fall apart again. Because they always fall apart." He shakes his head again. "I know I sound crazy. I *know*. I'm trying not to, but it's like the harder I try, and the more I know it's irrational, the louder it gets. I'm trying to be grateful. I really am, but no matter how much I know I shouldn't be, I'm just..."

"Scared," Tony says.

Peter nods again.

"That's not crazy, Pete. You just said it yourself: things always fall apart. Or they have, for you, in the past. There's nothing irrational about feeling afraid they're going to fall apart again. And maybe the only way that's gonna go away is when you have some proof that things *are* safe now. And the only way *that's* gonna happen is with time. So why don't you let me and Pepper worry about it. Let us just... prove that things are safe. One day at a time."

Peter looks skeptical. But he says, softly, "Okay."

"And in the meantime, can we make a deal? Will you tell me? When you get this—voice or this feeling or whatever? I don't know if I can always make it go away, but just in my experience things like that always feel louder when you're the only one who can hear them."

Peter is flushed, clearly embarrassed. But he just says, “Okay,” again.

This is, honestly, more than Tony had hoped for. It’s far more than he’s had so far. And there is a large part of him that wants to leave it there, to head back into the lab and work on getting the chatty, smart, self-assured Peter of before back once more. But there are two other faces in his mind, two other tired, worried teenagers that he can’t leave dangling over the mire of their own uncertainty for any longer.

“There’s one more thing, Pete.”

Peter looks at Tony shiftily, out of the corner of his eye. He knows what Tony is about to say, but he lets him say it anyway.

“Your friends have been calling. They said you’re not answering your phone.”

Peter looks away.

“Look, I get it if you need space. I even understand if you’re angry. They get it, too. They asked me to apologize, actually, so—”

Peter’s gaze snaps around, eyes wide, brow furrowed. “Apologize?” he says. “For what?”

Now it is Tony’s turn to frown. “They’re under the impression that you’re pissed at them for leaving you in the lurch last winter. They said—”

“*What?* No. No, no, no. I’m not—they’re the ones who should be mad at *me* .”

“Why am I not surprised that this is a mutual guilt complex? Pete. What are you talking about?”

Peter’s lip starts to tremble, but he doesn’t start to cry. Not yet.

“Mr. Stark, I was awful to them. Both of them. I lied—I lied *all the time*. And then the second I told them the truth, it was only because I needed them. I used them. I—”

“They’re your friends, Peter. They wanted to help you. I know because they’ve told me repeatedly over the last week. And they’ve also told me that they want to keep helping you now.”

Peter says, “I don’t deserve it.”

Tony gets to his feet. Peter shrinks, just a little. But Tony doesn’t back down.

“There’s a lot of stuff,” he says, “that you and I are gonna work on. There’s a lot of stuff I can let slide. But that? No way, kid. No way. You deserve all the help you can get. And you deserve the kind of friends who’ll spend a whole week blowing up a billionaire’s phone just to make sure their friend is okay. You don’t get to say otherwise. You don’t get to believe otherwise.”

Now a tear falls. Just the one. Peter wipes it away quickly.

“What if... what if they don’t think of me the same?”

“You mean—?”

“I’m so embarrassed,” says Peter quietly. “I’m just... I’m so...”

Tony sits back down. He leans toward Peter once more.

“Nobody,” he says, “thinks less of you because of what Westcott did. If they’re anything like me, they think you’re that much more of a hero. And even if you don’t believe that, don’t your friends deserve the chance to say it for themselves? Don’t you all deserve the chance to be honest with one another?”

Peter doesn’t agree. He doesn’t disagree, either.

Tony pulls his phone out of his pocket. He slides it across the table.

“You deserve friends, kid. And they deserve you. Please, give them a call.”

There is a pause—then, slowly, Peter reaches out, and takes the phone.

“What do I say to them?” he says.

Tony sags with relief.

“You tell them the truth,” says Tony. “And if you need any help, you know where I’ll be.”

He gets up, turns away, and crosses the kitchen, where he busies himself with the pretense of doing the dishes, even though the entire place is fully automated. It’s a good excuse, anyway, to hide the grin—the first real grin he’s had in weeks, maybe months—that spreads across his face when he hears Peter, behind him, say,

“Hey, Ned. It’s me.”

Almost Normal

Tony's living room is full of teenagers.

Well. "Full" is maybe an exaggeration. In fact, relative to the very expensive couch on which they are sitting, shoulder to shoulder, they both appear, to Tony at least, extraordinarily small. But there are certainly *more* of them than he is accustomed to, and that in itself is enough to mean he has spent the last fifteen minutes biting his tongue against the many, many sarcastic comments he would like to make to cut through the tension that is straining the air between them, making the room feel occupied in the extreme.

Ned's eyes are darting around the penthouse like he's afraid if he doesn't take it all immediately it might disappear. He talked non-stop on the ride over, according to Happy—who picked them both up—but hasn't said a word since he arrived. At least, not since the elevator doors opened to reveal Tony, purposely and ineffectually dressed in his least intimidating outfit (jeans and a Def Leppard t-shirt), as he stood in the kitchen, putting together a platter of sandwiches and feeling like as much of an imposter in this domestic scene as Ned apparently does.

MJ, as if in deliberate counter to her dumbstruck friend, had walked into the apartment with all the self-assurance and skepticism of an OSHA inspector.

"If you're going to overcompensate with your interior design," she said, peering out the ceiling-high windows toward the distant ground, "shouldn't you at least try to be subtle about the overcompensation?"

Pepper, helping Tony with the sandwiches, had to duck her head to hide her laughter.

But MJ's bravado has faded in the intervening half hour, most of which, after a cursory tour of the apartment, has been spent seated around the living room in the aforementioned tense silence, waiting for Peter to make an appearance. But so far nothing.

Tony is still trying to find the balance between giving Peter his space and pushing him when necessary. That balance was easier at the lab, when Peter's walls were down—which is probably the only reason he gathered the courage to invite his friends over (though he still needed Tony's repeated assurance that yes, he was allowed to bring guests into his own home). Since they arrived back at the apartment the prior evening, Tony has watched those walls slowly rise back up in Peter's expression, until the kid finally retreated to his room about an hour before his friends were due to appear, looking almost as uncertain as he did in the hospital, when Tony told him he was bringing him home.

Tony is slightly afraid, now, that if he forces Peter to come into the living room he risks the kid heading for the window instead. But his desire to be rid of unfamiliar awkwardness wins out in the end. He's Tony Stark, dammit, and if he can save the President of the United States from a madman on genetic-altering super-steroids, he can save himself from the nervous stares of two teenagers by forcing himself to talk to a third.

He gets to his feet.

"Be right back," he says. "Try not to get too rowdy while I'm gone. You especially, Neddo. Settle down."

Ned turns a violent shade of red, but still says nothing.

Ned and MJ watch him leave, silent.

Peter's room is equally silent, when Tony enters it a moment later, though for a different reason: it is empty.

Or so it appears at first glance. Tony, who has learned his lesson when it comes to prematurely panicking upon entering the kid's room, remembers, this time, to look up.

Sure enough, Peter is on the ceiling, upside-down and pacing. Tony waits until Peter spots him—and turns almost as red as Ned did a second ago—to speak.

"I'd say that's unsettling, but I occasionally bunk with a superintelligent android who can phase through walls," he says. "All the same, are you planning on joining us any time soon, Pete? I mean, you know. On the floor."

Peter drops to the ground in front of Tony. As he straightens he says, "I don't know if I can do this."

"Fair enough," says Tony. "But your friends don't seem to share that doubt. It took MJ about four seconds to start questioning my masculinity, so I get the feeling she's pretty comfortable. And Ned might be so afraid of me he's in danger of imploding, but he's here. They're both here."

"I don't know what I'm going to say to them."

"Maybe you don't have to say anything, Pete. Maybe it's enough to just show up. And if either of them give you trouble," he adds, because Peter is still chewing his bottom lip like he intends to gnaw it off, "I can always sic Pepper on them."

Peter stops biting his lip. He smiles weakly. "You say that like it's a joke, Mr. Stark. She's way scarier than you are."

"You know what? I'll give you that one. So what do you say? You coming, kid?"

Peter nods. And together they head back into the living room.

MJ and Ned are facing away from them, but they both turn in their seats as they hear Peter and Tony enter the room. Peter stops in his tracks when their eyes find him, and for a minute their expressions are perfect mirrors of one another—pale and uncertain and just a little afraid. As if the future of their friendship will be determined by whatever happens next. Which, of course, it will.

"Um," says Peter, "hey guys."

MJ is the first to break the stillness. She elbows Ned in the ribs and gets to her feet. Ned does the same, albeit much more clumsily.

MJ gestures around the apartment.

"Hey dork," says MJ, "is this why you haven't been in touch? Too busy reaping the benefits of late-stage capitalism?"

Peter smiles. It's hesitant, wavery. So is his voice when he says, "I actually prefer 'new-era Feudalism.' And I'll never forget the peasants."

MJ's reciprocal smile is, finally, genuine. "You're such a nerd, Parker."

"Back at you, Jones."

Without warning, Ned's face crumples. Peter and MJ are as startled by this as Tony is. Unlike Tony, the sudden tears do not make them freeze: in fact, they make Peter come unstuck from his spot on the carpet. He hurries into the living room.

"I'm sorry," Peter says. "Ned, I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"*I'm* sorry," Ned says. "I thought—I thought—and when you disappeared, I was so *mad* at you, I didn't even—"

"It's okay," says Peter. "Ned, it wasn't your fault. It was—"

"It wasn't anyone's fault."

MJ's voice is sharp enough that both boys stop talking. Sharp enough even Tony is a little impressed. Just as he is impressed with her hard, serious expression when she stares both boys down.

"It wasn't anyone's fault," she says again. "Can we just—I'm just glad you're here, Peter. I'm glad we're all here."

She twitches forward, then back, hesitating. Tony thinks she is about to withdraw, but at the last moment MJ seems to steel herself, her mind made up: she leans forward, and pulls Peter into a hug.

Tony tenses, certain Peter will push her away, make a break for it—the way he would if Tony tried the same. For a moment that looks like exactly what Peter is about to do: his whole body goes rigid at the contact. Then—

Peter relaxes. He puts his head on MJ's shoulder. He hugs her back. After a second, he reaches for Ned.

Right as Ned is allowing himself to be drawn into the hug, a hand touches Tony's elbow. It's Pepper, appearing silently at his side and carrying a plate with two of the sandwiches the pair of them spent the morning preparing. She jerks her head at the hallway.

"Let's give them some space," she whispers.

As soon as she says it, Tony knows she is right; this is one aspect of Peter's life that does not require his intervention. He nods, and follows Pepper down the hallway to the guest bedroom, where she sets the sandwiches on the desk by the window while Tony sits heavily on the armchair in the corner and tries not to bring up the fact that this is the first time he has been in the guest bedroom since Pepper took it over. She hasn't exactly had time for interior decorating since she arrived, but the room still has Pepper written all over it, because she designed it before she moved out. It smells like her perfume, too—a smell that has Tony reaching defiantly for his sandwich to cover up the fact that it makes his stomach tight from the knowledge of that same scent's absence in his own room.

As Pepper takes the desk chair and her own sandwich, she says, "You're doing a really good job with him, Tony."

Tony shrugs, trying not to let on that he is listening to the murmur of teenage voices down the hall, nor that he is resisting the temptation to tell FRIDAY to just pull up the living room cameras on one of the holographic screens in the bedroom.

"You sound surprised, Miss Potts," he says. "Haven't I always been good at bullshitting my way through impossible, terrifying, confusing situations?"

Pepper smiles. “Well, who could deny that, Mr. Stark? But I don’t think you’re bullshitting this time. I think you might actually have a knack for this.”

“This? You mean flailing my way through all the emotional baggage I never dealt with when I was a kid so I don’t totally fuck it up for this one?”

“That’s... actually exactly what I mean. But I was going to call it ‘parenting.’”

Tony almost drops his sandwich. He hasn’t heard that word since Dr. Brainerd said it in the hospital, and just as that night, he is overcome with an overwhelming feeling of imposition, of falsehood when he hears it.

But Pepper is being serious. She is considering him over her own sandwich, still smiling, but fainter now.

“I never thought I’d see you become a dad,” she says. “And now it makes me sad that I never thought of it as a possibility.”

Tony laughs awkwardly. “I’m still not sure the term applies, Pep. I’m... I don’t know what I am. I’m just the guy trying his best to make up for his many, many mistakes. But I’ve always been that guy. Now I’m just... doing it for someone besides myself, I guess.”

Pepper continues to smile as she takes a bite of her sandwich. When it becomes clear that she is not going to say anything else, Tony tries on another smile of his own to cover his bemusement.

After a little while, the sound of laughter makes its way down the hallway and through the open door of the room where Pepper and Tony sit, silently sharing their meal.

Ned and MJ spend the rest of the day in the penthouse, exploring, playing card games, but mostly just talking. If either of them are put off by this necessary confinement, they don’t mention it—not to Peter and not to Tony and Pepper, who judge it safe to make their reappearance when the sound of laughter becomes more frequent than the sound of whispers. Ned’s tongue comes loose in the wake of whatever the three of them have been discussing; by the time Tony slides back into the living room, he is commenting non-stop on everything in the house, dubbing nearly all of it “the coolest thing he’s ever seen.” Even MJ has trouble maintaining her narrow-eyed judgment of Tony’s wealth when he takes her to the room where he keeps his father’s old first editions. It disappears completely when Tony tells her she can borrow whatever she likes.

As for Peter...

He’s not exactly the kid he was in the lab. This is not Peter as he is when he is focused on a project, be that Tony’s nanites or his own Spider-Man activities. He’s a little more subdued, therefore, than Tony might have expected—responding to Ned’s enthusiasm with gentle acquiescence that yes, everything is pretty cool, and to MJ’s discernment with quick-witted but nevertheless quiet rejoinders that still make MJ smile every time. He’s not quite ready to let his guard down completely. But Tony can tell he is happy they’re there.

It’s a start. It’s enough for now, anyway.

It’s also why Tony feels almost as much regret as Ned and MJ display when, around nine that

evening, he announces that it's time to take them home.

"Sorry, young nerds, but Happy informs me that at least one of you has a curfew that will be enforced by a terrifying, rolling-pin wielding mother—his words, by the way—and I always promised Pepper that if any woman gets the honor of murdering me for missing an agreed upon meeting time, it was going to be her. So—hup hup. Gather yourselves. Shed your tears. Get in my car, so I can finally stop talking."

He takes the kids home. Happy was supposed to do it, but Tony finds he doesn't mind: it gives Peter a chance to get out of the house for once, as well as a chance at more time with his friends.

Tony pretends not to notice how Peter blushes when MJ squeezes his hand—very briefly—as she gets out of the backseat. Harder to ignore, however, is the conversation Ned initiates on the way to his own apartment, after MJ is gone.

"I wish you were coming to school tomorrow," he says, voice lowered, though Tony suspects he wants Tony to hear. "It's been crazy, dude. Everyone wants to know if I know anything about you and Sp—you know what. I mean, I haven't told anyone, I promise—"

"I know you haven't," says Peter. He glances at Tony, whose eyes immediately dart away from the rearview mirror, but not before he sees some of the tightness return to Peter's shoulders. "I'm sorry you're having to deal with that again. I wish..."

"No," says Ned. "No, it's not like that. Not like that at all. Dude. People believe you."

Tony looks in the mirror again, just in time to see Peter's eyes dart up, disbelieving.

"They—?"

"They're totally on your side, Peter. Well, okay, not all of them. But most of them. The ones who matter anyway. Everyone knows"—he lowers his voice again, completely unnecessarily—"Spider-Man was never really a bad guy. They saw what you did on the beach. I mean, some people were mad about it because, you know, Liz and everything, but then she totally shut them down before she moved. She made this whole announcement during her last decathlon practice about how her dad was wrong and Spider-Man was right, and you could tell she meant it because, like, her life was ruined, so why would she lie? And—um, I hope this is okay—MJ and I have kind of been defending you when people say... the things they sometimes say. It took a little while, but people are really starting to believe us. Flash like, actually apologized to me the other day. He said I should apologize to you too. He said he knows Spider-Man wouldn't have done what he did if you weren't telling the truth."

"Flash said that?"

Ned nods. "And Principal Morita too. He pulled me into his office last week to ask if I had seen you at all. I don't know what he said to you, but it was definitely the most awkward experience of my life. He almost cried when he asked me to tell you he was sorry." Ned glances at Tony, who once again averts his gaze. "Look, Peter, I don't know what you're... what you want to do now, and you know I'm totally down to just reserve every weekend for the foreseeable future for hanging out... but it would be really, really great if you came back to school. I mean, eventually. If that's... if that's what you want."

Peter is spared from having to respond, because they have just arrived at Ned's apartment. Tony turns around in his seat, allowing Peter to look away, to gather himself.

“Last stop, kids,” Tony says. “Ned. Always a pleasure.”

Ned blushes again, though not as violently as he did that morning. “Um. Thanks Mr. Stark. See you soon, Peter?”

Peter nods.

And Ned is gone.

Peter climbs into the front seat. They spend most of the ride home in silence, Peter staring out the window at the passing city, face inscrutable. Tony lets him contemplate whatever it is he’s contemplating for most of the ride, but when there are just two blocks left between them and their apartment, he can hold his tongue no longer.

“You know,” he says, “it’s something to think about eventually. School, I mean. It doesn’t have to be Midtown. I actually have some sway at a few places around town, and we can make sure you end up somewhere that won’t give you any crap. And if they do, I can make Happy follow you around to your classes, you know, cross his arms and scowl at punks like he used to do for me. He’ll be over the moon for the assignment, he’s wasted on asset management. But if you do want to go back to your old school, we can talk about that too. When you’re ready.”

Peter takes a moment to reply.

“I... don’t think I am just yet,” he says. “But it’s starting to feel like I might be. Eventually, I mean. It’s just... weird to feel like...”

“Like what?”

“Like I might feel normal again someday.”

Peter doesn’t turn around when he says it, but this is just fine by Tony. It means he doesn’t have to work to cover the smile that arrives when Peter says it.

He’ll probably never admit it. But, in that moment at least, *normal* is one of the best words Tony Stark has ever heard.

Normal, however, doesn’t last.

Of course it doesn’t. Because he’s Tony Stark, and nothing normal was ever meant for him. And because he dragged Peter into his life, unwittingly or not, normal is not meant for Peter either.

This revelation arrives when, upon reaching the top floor of their building, the elevator doors open to reveal that Pepper is not alone in the penthouse living room, like she was when Peter and Tony left an hour ago. She is sitting on the couch, next to a smartly-dressed brunette whom Tony recognizes immediately.

Maria Hill gets to her feet. And Tony’s heart drops into his.

If the look on her face is any indication, she does not come bearing good news. If there was any doubt about this, it is washed away by the look on Pepper’s, who also gets to her feet at the sight of them and says, voice quivering with some unidentifiable emotion, “Peter. Sweetheart, I think you’d

better go to your room.”

Whatever small hope had arrived for Peter in the wake of his friends’ visit is gone now. Seemingly unconsciously, he sticks a hand into his pocket, clutches his StarkPhone. Says, to Maria, “Who are you?”

Maria doesn’t reply. She is looking at Peter with a stricken expression. She looks to Tony for help.

“Peter,” says Tony. “Pepper’s right. You need to go to your room, kid.”

Peter turns to him. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll come explain. I swear I will. But you gotta give us a minute to talk, okay?”

But Peter still waits, forcing Tony to meet his eye.

“Peter, I promise I’ll explain after. Just give me a second, okay?”

Peter pauses just another moment longer. Just long enough to give Maria a quick, searching look. Maria meets his eye. In hers, an unmistakable apology.

Reluctantly, Peter heads for his room.

When he is out of earshot, and Tony has stepped out of the foyer and into the living room, Maria says, “Tony, I’m sorry. They’re dropping the charges against Westcott.”

Maria has never been one to mince words. For once, Tony wishes she was. She might as well have just smacked him across the face. His skin actually starts to tingle painfully as what she has said lands.

“That’s not possible,” he says.

“I’m sorry,” says Maria, “but it is. I wanted to let you know before it hit the news, but I just confirmed it with my contact in the NYPD. The DA isn’t going to pursue the case any further.”

Tony immediately looks at Pepper, but she doesn’t look outraged, or disbelieving, or like Maria has just stomped on her still-beating heart, which are all things Tony is currently feeling. Pepper has already heard this. And Pepper just looks... grieved.

“Tony...,” she says.

“No,” says Tony. “No. Wrong answer. *Not possible*. Because the last time we talked, Maria, you told me what DeMarcus Smith said. And if DeMarcus Smith said the same things he said to you to *anyone else*—”

“DeMarcus withdrew his statement this morning.”

Tony stops talking abruptly. His throat works for a second before it can form any more words.

“He—why would he do that?”

“I don’t know,” says Maria. Her stoicism is cut with a brief flash of something like mourning. “I had been in contact with him until last night, but when I tried to contact him today I got sent straight to voicemail every time. I think he blocked my number.”

“So track him down,” Tony snarls. “Get face to face, make him explain—”

"I can't do that, Tony. We are walking one hell of a thin line as it is already. With how high-profile this case is? With how high-profile *you* are? One single wrong move and we're looking at witness intimidation on top of everything else they're flinging at you. Do you really want—?"

"*Witness intimidation*? What, like I'm the goddamn Italian Mafia? I just want people to know the truth, how is that so fucking hard to understand?"

"Tony," says Pepper warningly, "volume."

Reluctantly, with difficulty, Tony lowers his voice.

"What about the others?"

Maria presses her lips into a thin line.

"None of them are talking."

"*None?*"

"Tony."

"No. You told me you thought—there are *five other boys*. He did this to five other kids, and you're telling me not *one* of them wants to see his scumbag ass behind bars? How? *Why?*"

"They're not kids anymore, Tony," says Maria. "The boy before DeMarcus? He just graduated from UNH, he's getting married in the fall—he doesn't want anything to do with this, doesn't want his fiance to know—"

"So go to the next one!"

"I did," says Maria flatly. "I went to all of them. And Tony, I tried, I swear I did, but Westcott did a number on them. On all of them. They all came from broken homes, and terrible situations—the way some of them talk, they still think Westcott rescued them from that. They still think they owe him something."

Tony recoils.

"How—?"

"It's not all of them," Maria goes on, cutting across him before he can start shouting again. "The two oldest, the first—you could tell they hated him, but I still couldn't get a word out of either of them."

"So try harder. Tell them—"

"They don't want to get involved because of you, Tony."

Tony closes his mouth.

When Tony glances at Pepper, she is looking toward the hallway, rubbing her right hand in her left like it is paining her. She does not look at Tony. He turns his attention back to Maria.

Maria takes a deep breath.

"It's a high-profile case," she says. "It's *the* high-profile case. It's Spider-Man. It's... Tony Stark's orphan. If they come forward, there's no way they keep their privacy. These men have families of

their own now. They have jobs, they have lives. They don't want to overturn everything like that. And I'm sorry Tony, but I can't say I blame them. Would you, if you were in their situation?"

Tony's hands are shaking. His vision is starting to blur at the edges. But before these things can escalate beyond the point where he has control over either of them, Pepper turns away from the hallway, reaches out, and takes his hand.

Tony forces himself to be calm. Squeezes Pepper's hand a few times before he trusts himself to reply.

"How is it possible," he says, "that I am still screwing that kid's life up, even now?"

"Tony," says Pepper, "you aren't—"

"Westcott can't get away with this," says Tony. "He's not going to."

Comprehension flashes through Pepper's eyes, followed by a warning, red and glaring.

"You know you can't."

"Can't what? Stop a pedophile? Because I'm pretty sure I can. I'm pretty sure that's *exactly* what I'm going to do, because if the courts aren't going to take care of him, I'm sure as hell—"

"You are a *parent* now, Tony. You cannot do that to him. You can't put yourself at risk like that!"

"So what am I supposed to do, Pepper? Sit back and watch while Westcott lives his life without a shred of consequences just because *I'm* so famous that justice is apparently impossible? There is absolutely no way—"

"There's another option."

Tony and Pepper halt their argument. They look at Maria.

Maria looks... exhausted. The closest Tony has ever seen her come to that expression was the one she wore after Coulson died. It makes him want to stop her from saying whatever it is she's about to say. But he doesn't. He doesn't say anything.

"Peter could testify."

"No," says Tony.

Maria looks like she was expecting this. She exhales. Tries again.

"Tony," she says, "everyone knows he made the original accusation. He's the one with the most recent experience being Westcott's foster child. He's the one people are expecting to hear from anyway. If he goes on the record—"

"If he goes on the record, he's got about fifteen minutes before every aspect of his life becomes public knowledge. His name. His records. You think he gets to keep whatever scrap of a normal life he might have had if he decides to get on that stand? And that's not even to mention Spider-Man. How deep do you think they'll dig into that one before they're satisfied, huh? No. Not a chance. Not a *chance*. I'm not going to put him through that. Do you really want me to go look that kid in the eye and tell him he's gotta stand up in front of the world and tell them what Westcott did to him? When he hasn't even been able to tell us? No way, Maria. No way in hell."

Maria says, evenly, "Then Westcott is going to get away with it."

There is a long, static silence.

Maria reaches for her coat. She pulls it on. Turns toward the door.

“Talk to the kid,” she says. “Think it over. I’m... sorry it happened this way.”

And Maria leaves.

For what feels like a long time, Tony stands staring after her, clenching and unclenching his fists. Pepper stands beside him, watching him.

She speaks first.

“You can’t do it, Tony.”

“Can’t do what?”

Tony’s voice is low and dangerous. He does not look at her when he speaks.

He is thinking about his suits. He is wondering which one will best do the job.

Pepper seems to understand this. She grabs Tony’s arm.

“Tony,” she says. “Tony, look at me.”

“I’m not making him testify.”

“Tony. *Look at me.*”

Finally, Tony does. Pepper’s eyes are wide, red-rimmed. As serious as he has ever seen them.

“He can’t get away with this, Pepper.”

“I am *not* suggesting that we let him. What I am suggesting is that you take a minute and think about this before you blast off and do something everyone here is going to regret.”

“He deserves it,” Tony seethes. “He deserves worse than anything I could do to him.”

“I don’t disagree,” says Pepper. “But you cannot think about him right now. You have to think about Peter. What happens to Peter if you go after Westcott, Tony? You really think you’ll get away with attacking him—killing him? Every person in the world will know what happened and who did it, and then what happens to Peter?”

Tony is so far gone in his own anger he doesn’t even consider the answer. Just says, “You’ll take care of Peter.”

“That is *not* what I mean and you know it. What happens to him if he loses *another* father figure, Tony? What happens if he thinks you chose vengeance over being in his life? What do you *think* is going to happen?”

Finally, Tony’s brain stops humming with anger. He stops straining toward the door. He looks at Pepper—really *looks* at her, and sees that she is not merely worried: she is frightened. She is angry, too. And most of all, she is desperate.

Tony sags. He puts his hand over hers. Pepper’s sigh of relief, when she takes him in her arms, sends goosebumps railing up and down his arms.

“I can’t tell him,” Tony says, holding onto her like she is the only thing keeping him afloat, like he has done so many times before. “How am I supposed to say that everything is about to fall on him *again?*”

“It’s not all on him,” says Pepper. “It’s on us, too. And we’ll do it together. Okay, Tony? We’ll do it together.”

She untangles from his hug, but does not let go of his hand. When Tony nods, they turn toward Peter’s room together.

When they enter it, however, it is once again empty.

At first, Tony is sure the twinge of panic in his abdomen is a purely nervous reaction—automatic, the same twinge he felt that first night when he thought Peter had fled while his back was turned. When it happened before he was wrong. He must be wrong this time.

But when he looks up, the ceiling is blank.

When he looks down, he sees only Pepper. And Pepper has gone pale.

She is not looking at the ceiling. She is looking at the window. The reinforced glass window, which is supposed to be shatter-resistant, and impossible to open.

The window, which is broken, and is spilling cold air into the room—which, for once, is just as empty as it seems.

Peter is gone.

What We Need

“Some heads up would have been nice, FRI.”

In the living room, Tony is frantically pulling up the footage from the building’s exterior cameras on every available screen while Pepper, standing in the kitchen, talks to Happy over the phone in a low, rapid whisper.

Outside, it has begun to rain. Even from a distance Tony can hear water rushing in through the broken window down the hall, but a ruined carpet is currently at the bottom of his list of worries.

A crack of thunder nearly drowns out FRIDAY’s reply.

“He ordered me not to say anything, boss. You’re the one who gave him admin privileges.”

Right. Damn it. The stupid admin privileges, which Tony gave to Peter as one of his many attempts to make the kid feel like he was in his own home, and not a visitor in Tony’s. Tony curses himself for the decision now— *boundaries, idiot, boundaries* —but there’s nothing to be done about it in the moment. The priority is finding Peter.

The security cameras caught him crawling down the building, wearing a sweatshirt with the hood pulled over his face, but they lose him almost the moment he hits the ground. Of course they do, because Peter has six months’ experience dodging detection—a few weeks living indoors again haven’t changed that. Which means Tony is going to have to rely on other resources.

“His phone?”

“He took it, but Karen turned off the tracker. She’s blocked me too.”

“Shit. You don’t think—?”

“We should check Midtown,” says Pepper, appearing at Tony’s shoulder and making him start.

“Happy says he’s got his friends on high alert in case Peter tries to visit the girls, but it would take him hours to get to the Hamptons. And I have a feeling that’s not where he’s headed.”

Tony agrees, though admitting it even to himself leaves a sour taste in the back of his mouth. He nods.

“FRIDAY, check any possible routes from here to Westcott’s apartment.”

“He’s got his hood up, boss. Gonna make facial recognition a little tough.”

“I know. Just check for any runty teens, I don’t know. Anything is better than nothing.”

While FRIDAY runs through the available footage, Tony runs his hands over his face.

“Super hearing,” he says, “what kind of dumbass forgets about something like that?”

“The kind of dumbass who was distracted by trying to protect his kid. You can’t beat yourself up over this, Tony. Not until after we find him, at least.”

Tony scrunches his eyes shut, but not in disagreement. Only to gather himself.

“I better suit up. I’ll be quicker if I’m in the air when FRIDAY comes through.”

“You can’t go after him as Iron Man,” says Pepper. “If anyone spots you it’s going to mean pandemonium. No one’s seen you in weeks, and the Westcott story just hit the major stations.”

She holds up her phone as evidence, but Tony doesn’t need to read past the first headline— *Spider-Man Victim Innocent* —to know Pepper is correct. If he suits up now the world will think he’s doing exactly what he wants to do—going after Westcott.

“Can Happy—?”

“Already here.”

The elevator doors slide open and Happy, soaking wet and wearing a sport jacket over a pair of sweatpants—testament to the haste in which he must have left his own apartment—leans into the apartment without entering it.

“Car’s waiting,” he says. “Let’s not let the little punk go another six months before we catch up with him this time, come on.”

Tony starts forward, and Pepper follows.

“Don’t you think—?”

“I’m coming with you,” Pepper says firmly. “We’re in it together, remember?”

Pepper is right, of course. And so that’s exactly how the three of them head into the night:

Together.

They’re in the car when FRIDAY finishes combing, Happy focused on the road, Pepper and Tony squinting out the windows, trying to spot Peter in the rain-blurred smudges of light and dark the city has become. The only advantage of the thunderstorm is that most people have retreated indoors, leaving fewer anonymous faces to pick through in search of Peter’s. But it’s coming down too heavily now to distinguish anyone from anyone else.

“I don’t think he’s heading for Midtown, boss,” says FRIDAY. “I even sent a drone, he’s nowhere near Westcott’s apartment.”

There is a collective sigh from all three of the car’s occupants. But the relief is short-lived. Because —

“Then where the hell is he going in this weather?” says Happy. “Did that pint-sized pain in the ass even grab a jacket before he leapt out a window straight into monsoon season?”

The faux-irritation doesn’t even come close to covering the worry in Happy’s voice.

“We should check with Ned and MJ,” says Pepper. “I don’t want to scare them, but I don’t know what choice we have. If he’s going to one of their places—”

“Hold on.” FRIDAY’s voice cuts across Pepper’s. “Yep, just got a glimpse of him. Outside a bank on Seventy Ninth. He dodged it pretty quick, but I saw his face, it’s definitely him.”

“What’s on Seventy-Ninth?” says Pepper.

“FRIDAY, what direction was he headed? East or west?”

“West, boss.”

Tony leans forward, through the space between the front seats.

“Turn the car around, Happy,” he says. “I know where he’s headed.”

There are no lights in the lot that houses the cluster of abandoned warehouses, including the one where Peter lived for nearly six months prior to coming to Tony’s. Normally—Tony knows this from the Baby Monitor footage, memories of which he has drawn on to get them there—the lights from the city, though distant, are usually enough to ward off the pitch, but not tonight: the storm has drenched everything in darkness. There are sharp slices of illumination, when lightning cuts across the wet-stone blackness of the sky, but otherwise they have to rely on the car’s headlights to guide them through the crumbling maze of buildings that was once Peter’s home.

Tony tries not to think of how many nights like this Peter must have spent here alone. Nights when there was no town car wending toward him out of the darkness, full of people who gave a damn. Too many, he knows. But not anymore.

“I think that’s it.” He points to a warehouse near the edge of the asphalt. Though it’s hard to tell through the gale, he thinks he recognizes the tin siding. “Happy, can you stay in the car, keep the lights on?”

“We gonna scare him off if we come at it like that?”

Tony shakes his head, not allowing his own doubt to enter his voice. “That’s not why he’s here.”

Happy nods and sets the car to idle, headlights aimed at the warehouse. Pepper and Tony get out of the car.

Even with their rain jackets—which Pepper had enough foresight to grab as they ran out of the apartment—everything uncovered is soaked within seconds. It’s probably been decades since anyone touched the infrastructure of this area, and without anywhere for the runoff to go, it is pooling on the asphalt, so it is already up to their ankles by the time they exit the car. Tony dons his wrist gauntlet—a staple of his wardrobe since before the debacle with Barnes, but especially in the time proceeding—and turns on the built-in flashlight to illuminate the already-broken lock on the warehouse doors.

Inside the warehouse is not much drier. The water has infiltrated, and there is a solid three inches of it on the warehouse floor, stagnant and dirty, but at least the roar from the continued downpour is muted somewhat. Pepper spots the spindly staircase before Tony does, but he mounts it first, testing his weight, and only once he’s safely reached the top does Pepper follow him onto the upper floor.

There is only one open door on the upper level, but Tony still knocks. When there is no reply, he pushes it wide and steps inside, Pepper at his heels.

The foreman's office, illuminated by Tony's gauntlet, is as he remembers it from the Baby Monitor footage, and yet for as terrible as those videos were to watch, the in-person experience is somehow far worse. The rusty file cabinets, the thick layer of dust on the floor, the strong odor of mildew—all speaking to its unwelcoming nature, its uninhabitability. And yet somehow Peter lived here.

Tony's first instinct is, as it was in Peter's bedroom, to look at the ceiling. But as he is staring up, Pepper grabs his arm. Points his gaze downward.

Peter is here. He's sitting on the floor, in the corner that holds the foreman's desk, back against the wall, hood down, knees drawn to his chest. He's soaked and shivering but either doesn't notice or doesn't care, because he hasn't touched the pile of ratty, stained blankets under the desk.

In one hand, he is clutching a water-warped piece of copier paper. In a brief lightning flash, Tony catches a glimpse of a photograph and a headline, but he can't read it. In the other, Peter holds a stack of crumpled money.

Peter is not looking at either of these things. He's got his head tilted back, against the wall, and seems to be staring at the ceiling. Or at nothing.

Pepper starts forward immediately, but before she can take a step Tony puts an arm out, halting her. Rather than approach himself, he lowers himself to sit a few feet from Peter, just like he did in the abandoned building, the night he pulled the mask off. Pepper gives Tony a searching look, but only for a second before she follows his lead.

Only when they are both sitting does Peter say anything, though he doesn't look at them when he does.

"I shouldn't have left."

"You shouldn't have heard about it that way, kid."

Slowly, Peter shakes his head. "I guess there's no good way to say it."

His grip on the copier paper tightens. He raises his head.

"I'll testify," Peter says.

Tony's stomach sinks. Pepper says, "You don't have to do that. Not if you don't want to. It's your choice, Peter."

Peter's lips twitch, though whether toward a smile or a frown is difficult to determine. Either way, the expression doesn't last.

"I called the girls," he says, "earlier this week. Happy—he gave me their number. So I could, you know, so I could see if they were okay. And they are. Emma said she really likes it there. She said they have horses."

Tony knows this. He's been checking on them too. The couple Happy left the girls with are older, childless, and completely in love with the girls already. They're planning to adopt them eventually. He's been checking in on Manny, too. After that first night CPS stepped back in with him, but with world's eyes on them—not to mention Tony's—they've done a better job of things this time. They found a long-lost aunt in Michigan. Manny seems comfortable there, at least.

Tony is guessing Peter already knows this. If he could keep an eye on the girls in these conditions, there's no way he isn't doing it with the new resources at his disposal. So he keeps his mouth shut.

Lets Peter talk.

“Lily won’t even talk to me.”

“I don’t think you should—” Pepper begins

“I get it,” Peter says. “She doesn’t know... she doesn’t understand what’s going on. As far as she knows, Skip is still her dad.” He squeezes his eyes shut. “I’m tired of people not knowing the truth. I know everyone isn’t going to believe it, but... they don’t believe me anyway. And maybe if I say something, some of them will. I’m... I don’t want to have to hide in your apartment forever. It’s not—I mean, I like it there, I really do. But I miss my friends. I miss the girls. And my school. And I—I can’t not be Spider-Man. I have to do it. I don’t know if I can explain it, but I have to. And as long as everyone thinks Skip is a great guy, I know I can’t. So I’ll testify. It’s just” —his breath catches— “it’s just, I’m not sure you guys will want me around as much if I do.”

Peter blinks furiously, but the tears rise anyway, making his eyes shine in the next crack of lightning. They don’t fall, though, even when Peter finally lowers his gaze to look at Tony and Pepper.

“Peter,” says Pepper. “There is nothing you can do to make us not want you, do you understand that?”

But Peter shakes his head.

“You don’t get it,” he says. “Everything that’s happened—all the stuff you guys are dealing with—I could have stopped it. We never... all the bad stuff in the papers and the things they’re saying about you on the news... you guys don’t even get to go outside anymore. And I know it’s because of me—”

“Because we *want* to.”

“But if you knew everything, you might not.” Peter’s grip on the news article tightens even further, as though he is steeling himself. “I could have stopped Skip.”

A roar of thunder.

“Peter,” says Pepper. “It wasn’t your job to stop him, sweetheart.”

“But I *could have* .” Peter takes a gasping breath, quickly cuts it off. Gathers himself. Goes on. “They’re gonna want to know what... what he did, and why he did it, and if I get on the stand, I’m going to have to tell the truth. And the truth is that I could have stopped him. But I didn’t.”

Pepper glances at Tony. Tony sees it out of the corner of his eye, but his own focus is fixed firmly on Peter. He can’t speak yet, though. So Pepper does.

“Peter,” she says again, slowly, “even if you... you aren’t old enough to consent. You know that, right? Even if you—”

“No,” says Peter, shaking his head hard enough that rain water goes every direction. “No, you don’t—it wasn’t like that. I never—I never wanted it.”

Pepper lets out a shaky breath. “Then—”

“I had my powers.” Another lightning flash. “The last time he... the last time it happened, I had my powers. And I didn’t stop him. I knew. I *knew* if I just hit him once, just once, he wouldn’t bother

me anymore. But I couldn't do it. I just... I didn't. And now everyone's life is ruined. Your lives are ruined. The girls' lives are ruined. And that's because of me."

Peter keeps speaking, even as his voice cracks. "I know I have to testify," he says, "I know he can't get away with it, and I know... I can't let this happen to anyone else. I can't. But you needed to know. You needed to know it's okay if—if you don't want me anymore—"

"I was your age when I went to college," says Tony.

It's such an unexpected statement that Peter stops talking abruptly. Pepper, similarly bemused, whips her head around. But Tony still keeps his eyes on Peter.

"You—?"

"I was fifteen," Tony goes on. "And when I first got in, I was terrified. My dad was pretty desperate to get rid of me by that point—understandably, because I was a bit of a pyro at that particular juncture—so he signed me up to live in the dorms, and I was sure people were going to take one look at me and *know* I didn't belong. Runty little rich kid. Thinks he's better than everyone else. You know the deal. Predictable shit, but hey—reality isn't always a bucket of surprises.

"But this time, it turned out, I got lucky. The summer before I moved out, I had a growth spurt. You're looking right at me, so you know I didn't exactly grow into Michael Jordan overnight, but it was enough I didn't look like a total twerp anymore. And I started lifting weights, too, just to speed things along, so by the time the semester started, I almost passed for eighteen. You know, if I kept my head down and didn't let anyone see that my face was smoother than a baby's butt cheek—unless you were counting the acne."

Peter huffs out a laugh, more surprised than actually humorous. Tony's own lips twitch.

"Yeah," he says. "There was a time before the goatee, believe it or not. Anyway, it turned out not to be such a great cover. Because even if I didn't look like a little kid anymore, I had one big factor working against me: I was still famous as shit. Turns out it doesn't matter how old you look when the whole world knows you're fifteen anyway."

"They... did they mess with you?" Peter asks.

Tony shakes his head.

"Actually," he says, "it was the opposite. By the second week of the semester I was about as hot as shit gets on a campus full of math nerds. Once people realized who I was, who my dad was, I started getting invited to parties left and right. Everyone wanted to hang out with me. Everyone wanted to have classes with me, and study with me, and be best friends with me... and I mean *everyone*."

"Mr. Stark... are you *flexing* on me right now?"

Tony laughs, short and gentle, but still slightly bitter. "I wish, you little smartass." He clears his throat. Glances at Pepper for the first time since he started talking. She is watching him intently, her mouth firmly closed. Tony looks away and resumes his story, though his palms have started to sweat. "It uh, it turns out just because people want to be around you doesn't mean they actually like you. A lesson I've learned more times than I can count, but back then it was still pretty novel. And I was fifteen, and away from home for the first time, and so lonely I probably would have done anything to be friends with any of those grimy little undergrads, even if I had known what

they were doing, which I didn't. So I said yes. To all of it. To the study dates, the campus events, the parties... *especially* the parties."

Tony pauses here, partly so he can decide how much detail the kid needs; partly because a phantom taste of cheap liquor and cigarette smoke has just risen to the back of his throat.

He swallows it down.

"There are a lot of pretty girls at college parties," he says. "Even at a place like MIT. They come out of the woodworks when they sense a keg in the immediate vicinity. You'll see, someday. You'll be better prepared for it than I was, but you'll see. Me—it caught me completely off guard. Beautiful women left and right, smoking, drinking, flirting—and for the first time in my life, all of them wanted to talk to me."

Peter closes his mouth. He is shaking just slightly, just enough that Tony can see it, though whether it's from the cold or from what Tony is saying, he can't tell. Either way, Tony goes on.

"You can probably tell where this is going. This girl—this *woman* —comes up to me and offers me a drink. I'd never drank before then, believe it or not. But I hadn't. My dad would have killed me. He tried, actually, when he found out, but that's a different story. In the moment, I wasn't thinking about my dad. It was just this total drop-dead knockout of an older woman and me—a lonely, nerdy, fifteen year old, all alone at his first house party. So when she offered me a beer, of course I said yes. And when she offered me another, I said yes again. And then I said yes to another. And when she asked me if I wanted to go upstairs with her, I said yes to that too. Even though I wanted to say no."

Tony takes a breath.

"I found out later," he says, "that some of the girls in the upper classes had a bet going. A little pool—they all put it together, so the pot must have been pretty hefty by the time this woman got around to me. The bet was 'Who Can Take Tony Stark's Virginity?' And she won." He huffs. It's not quite a laugh, not quite a sigh. "I still don't even know what her name was."

Pepper and Peter are both watching him, both sitting very, very still. Neither one tries to speak. And this is good, because Tony isn't finished yet.

"I'm not trying to compare what happened to me to what happened to you, kid," he says. "I know they're different situations, different... everything. That's not why I'm telling you this. I'm telling you this because by your criteria, I could have stopped her at any point. Could have said no. Could have physically stopped her. I wasn't little anymore, remember? But she was. She probably weighed one-fifteen soaking wet. I could have bench-pressed her if I wanted to. I definitely could have pushed her off of me. I wasn't that drunk. Hell, at that point, I didn't know what drunk *meant*. But I didn't do anything."

"Mr. Stark," says Peter hoarsely, "I'm really sorry."

Tony is tempted, as he usually is, to tell the kid to stop apologizing. Instead he says, voice hard, "Do you think I deserved it?"

Peter recoils. "What? Of course not. Of course you didn't—"

"Why?"

"Because—because she was older. She tried to get you drunk. She—"

“Took advantage of a kid? You’re goddamn right she did. And that’s exactly what Westcott did to you. That’s it, Peter. There’s no scenario in which you were supposed to stop him. There are only scenarios in which he was supposed to protect you and instead he took advantage, like the garbage that he is. End of story.”

“But I had—”

“Superpowers? Doesn’t matter.”

“But—”

“Peter. *It doesn’t matter.* Thinking you were supposed to be able to fight him off because you got superpowers is like thinking you should be able to run a marathon on a broken leg just because you’re wearing a cast. Nobody had that expectation of you except *you*, kid. And you think we’re gonna hate you for that? Never, kid. Never.”

Peter looks gobsmacked. His grips on the money and the article have both slackened. But he still manages to say, quietly, “Some people won’t see it like that.”

“Screw some people,” says Tony. “You know what some people think about me? What *most* people think about me? The only thing I give a shit about, Pete, is what you think about yourself. And I don’t want you to be like me. It took me years to get over some of the messed up ideas I got after that night. About sex, about drinking, about relationships... some of it I didn’t get over until I finally found the opposite. Not until I found Pepper.” Tony bites his tongue, avoids looking at her; he didn’t mean to say that. But he plows on anyway. “I don’t want you to have to wait decades to start feeling okay, Peter. I want this to be better for you than it was for me. And if telling the truth about Westcott is going to help you feel okay, then of course you’re going to do it, and of course we’re going to support you. But I don’t want you to feel like you’re doing it as some... recompense for a mistake you didn’t even make. Got it?”

Tony knows Pepper is still looking at him. He knows, even without being able to see her, that she is silently crying. But he can’t look at her, because he has to hold himself together now. For Peter.

Peter, who says, unexpectedly, “Okay.”

“Okay? Okay as in—?”

“I’ll testify,” Peter says. “But I’ll do it” —he swallows— “I’ll do it for me.”

Tony nods.

“Then we’ll help you however we can.”

“Of course we will.” Pepper’s voice is rough. She clears her throat. “Of course. We’re in this with you, Peter.”

“There’s one condition though,” says Tony.

Peter’s fingers curl up again, apprehensive.

“We’re going to keep Spider-Man out of it.”

Now Peter just looks resigned. “Mr. Stark. How? I can’t... if they ask me *anything* —”

“I’ll talk to our lawyers,” says Tony. “I’ll figure something out. But you said you need Spider-

Man, right?”

Still looking doubtful, Peter nods.

“Then they’re not taking that away from you. Not for this. That’s my condition.”

It’s an empty threat. If Peter wants this—wants to put himself out there like this, expose himself to the vultures—Tony isn’t going to stop him, no matter how much he wants to. But he’s not going to let Peter give away the last thing that is truly his. Not if he can help it.

After a long, silent pause, Peter nods.

“Thank you, Mr. Stark,” he says quietly.

Satisfied—even if his stomach does feel small and sharp and twisted with the prospect of everything that comes next—Tony gets to his feet. Pepper rises too, puts a gentle, subtle hand on Tony’s elbow, steadying him even though he didn’t know he needed steadying. After a second, Peter gets to his feet as well.

Before they head for the door, though, Tony says, “Actually, kid, I have one more condition.”

Peter looks like he was expecting this. His shoulders slump. He nods.

“I’d say we know each other pretty well by now, right? So do me a favor, kid. Call me Tony.”

By the time they are home and showered and dry, and Happy is snoring on the couch—having insisted that it was “too rainy to drive” the three blocks to his own apartment—the news of the dropped charges has spread to every conceivable news outlet, like ants over spilled sugar. Tony is propped up in bed, far too keyed-up to sleep, scrolling through these stories and relishing the stab in his abdomen every time he sees Westcott’s face in one of them. He is sharpening his hatred, making it clean and dangerous, because if he is sloppy about any of it—sloppy about his feelings—he is, like Pepper said, going to do something all of them regret.

He won’t go after him. Not now, not while the truth is something Peter needs. But that doesn’t mean he’s not going to be ready.

It is this mindset in which Tony is seething when there is a knock at his door. Which is why when he says, “Come in,” he says it absently, almost without noticing, and is therefore completely surprised when he looks up to see Pepper herself, hair still damp, dressed in silk button-down pajamas, slide into the room.

When he does recognize who and what he’s looking at, Tony lowers his phone.

“Is Peter—?”

“He’s asleep,” says Pepper. “I had FRIDAY check.”

Even still, Pepper glances over her shoulder once, as though she is expecting him. Then she closes the door.

Tony sits up a little straighter. Pepper has not been in his room—which used to be their room—

since she broke up with him.

“Is it okay if I come in?”

“Looks like you already have. But yeah. Of course.”

Pepper approaches the bed, sits in the chair beside it. She crosses her legs. Her posture, as always, is perfect. And yet somehow she still looks nervous.

“Are you—”

“That story,” says Pepper. “It was true, wasn’t it?”

Tony knew this was why she was here the moment he saw her, but he had still hoped it wasn’t. He sighs.

“Yeah. It was.”

“You never told me.”

“Only person I ever told was Rhodey, Pepper. And only because he was my roommate and he forced it out of me. It was thirty years ago, you shouldn’t—”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Why didn’t I...?”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Did you think I would... judge you? Or that I wouldn’t believe you? I’m just... I want to understand if I...”

“No.” Tony shakes his head, sighs again. “Pepper, no. It didn’t have anything to do with that.”

“Then why?”

Tony pushes the covers aside, shifts in the bed so he is sitting on the edge of it, facing her directly.

“Pepper, you’ve saved me so many times,” he says. “More times and from more things than I can begin to count. It used to scare me, sometimes, how much I needed you. And at some point, I think I realized it must scare you too. Being needed like that? By someone with as many needs as I have? Sometimes I don’t know how you did it as long as you did. So... I didn’t not tell you because I don’t trust you. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to feel like you had to keep saving me forever. I didn’t want you to feel like you couldn’t ever leave, if... if that was something you felt like you needed to do.”

Pepper takes a short, sharp breath.

“Can I stay?” she says.

Tony is so taken aback by this he doesn’t know how to respond. He leans back, just slightly, and Pepper seems to take this as an answer; she gets out of her chair, rounds the bed to the other side, and pulls Tony back into it as she takes the space beside him. Tony, pliant with surprise, pulls his legs back onto the mattress and allows Pepper to cover them both with the comforter.

It’s only when they are both sitting propped against the headboard that he regains himself enough to move. Tentative, he wraps an arm around her. Pepper leans into his side, puts her head on his chest.

“You know you don’t have to—”

“I love you, you idiot,” says Pepper. “And I miss you too much to keep pretending I don’t.”

Tony’s chest feels tight. But it is not the same tightness that has been pressing there for the past two weeks. This is just as breathless, and almost as painful. But it is not, for once, a bad sort of pain.

This feels kind of like hope.

“Well, shit, Pepper,” he says, “I love you too.”

The whispered conversation he and Pepper have, in bed the next morning, about how and when and what to tell Peter, turns out to be entirely pointless: as Pepper is sneaking out of Tony’s room toward the guest room, in an attempt to get dressed and get to the kitchen before anyone else wakes up, Peter emerges from his own room, blinking and bleary-eyed with sleep.

The blariness disappears the moment he spots Pepper, halfway out of Tony’s room with Tony at her back.

Everyone freezes. Peter’s eyes go wide, his face going red.

“Uh,” he says. “Oh. Um. I’m just gonna...”

He jerks a thumb over his shoulder and backs awkwardly into his room, turning away and shutting the door only at the last second.

Just as it closes over him, though, Tony sees Peter grin.

“Whoops,” says Tony.

“*Whoops?*” Happy is apparently awake as well; he has appeared at the end of the hallway, hair mussed, mouth scowling. “Are you telling me I slept on that couch all night for nothing?”

“Hi, Happy.”

Now Pepper is grinning too. A little guilty, but mostly pleased. It must be catching, because Happy can’t hold his own irritation for long. The corners of his mouth twitch.

“Well, it’s about goddamn time,” he says. “You two know you owe me big time, right?”

“Always, Hap,” says Tony. “Let’s start with breakfast.”

He puts an arm around Pepper’s shoulder. She puts one around his waist.

And they set off into the day together.

The Bravest Thing

Westcott, Parker, Stark Head to Court

Spider-Man still absent

Steven Westcott, whose name has become synonymous with the continued debate surrounding the role of superheroes, secret identities, and vigilantism within the justice system since he was attacked in his home eight weeks ago by the enhanced person known as “Spider-Man,” is set to appear in court this afternoon for an initial hearing.

Westcott, who is charged with molesting Peter Parker, 15, while the aforementioned was under his care as a foster child, has maintained his innocence throughout.

“My life has been dedicated to working with troubled teens,” said Westcott in his first televised interview, with Fox News NYC, on Friday evening. “While I’m deeply saddened that Peter has taken such an extreme route of rebellion, unfortunately I’m not surprised. Lies are one way troubled teens cry for help, and I saw a lot of that when he was living with me. I wish I could have given him the help he needed, but it’s in the hands of the court now. I’m just sad that such a disgusting and slanderous charge has been given as much attention as it has.”

The purpose of the preliminary hearing is for the prosecution to present the charges against Westcott, and to hear initial witness testimony. Parker is expected to give testimony, though details of what he will say have remained mostly secret, possibly due to efforts by Tony Stark, who has confirmed that he has taken custody of Parker in the wake of the incident with Spider-Man. While Stark himself has remained out of the public eye ever since—a rare deviation for the world’s most famous public figure—his representatives have confirmed that he will be accompanying Parker to court. Stark is not expected to testify.

When asked his opinion on Stark’s involvement, Westcott stated, “I hope he’s careful. If it happened to me, it can happen to him too.”

Not expected to make an appearance is Spider-Man, who has not been seen since the incident at Westcott’s home. Stark’s team continues to beg no comment.

“Not too late to back out, Pete. Just say the word and we’re on a jet to Acapulco in thirty minutes.”

Tony, Pepper, and Peter are sitting in the hallway outside the courtroom, on one of the narrow benches that line the long marble-floored hallways. Tony tries not to think of how many others, in similar situations, have sat upon these benches, waiting for someone to come call them inside, to either face their vindication or continued heartbreak. All three of them are wearing suits, and Peter, sandwiched between them, is jiggling his knee so hard the whole bench vibrates. Neither Pepper

nor Tony ask him to stop.

The hallway is empty. Due to the nature of the case, they've blocked off this entire section of the building, and because of Pepper's insistence that they arrive four hours early, they also avoided the crowds of reporters that would no doubt have swarmed them otherwise. But even without Peter's enhanced hearing, Tony can hear them now, pressing against the front doors of the courthouse, voices dulled into incomprehensibility by the sheer number of them talking at once. Tony has never been one to feel intimidated by a crowd, but today his heartbeat seems inextricably connected to the sounds outside: the louder they are, the louder it is.

Peter, though, just smiles, a little queasily, but nonetheless assured.

"I think I'm okay," he says. "But maybe ask me after?"

"Oh yeah," Tony says. "For sure. Forget Acapulco, we're breaking out the private islands once this is over. But really, Peter, if you don't want to do this..."

It's been a long five weeks since that night at the warehouse. Once Peter provided his initial testimony to the police and the prosecution—resulting in the renewed charges against Westcott—they all knew it was only a matter of time before his name made the papers. Sure enough someone—a former classmate, a teacher, an old acquaintance, it doesn't matter—leaked it just a few days after the charges were made public, and Peter's name has been at the top of every news website and in the mouths of every New Yorker ever since. In a particularly brazen move, *The Daily Bugle* even took it upon themselves to post Peter's CPS photo, which they must have snagged from one of the missing posters, since Tony has, as far as he can tell, erased it from the internet. Their one bit of luck is that the photo is as far as anyone has gotten: where CPS's poor record-keeping was Tony's downfall earlier in the year, it is, for now, keeping the worst of the vultures at bay.

Still, as much as Tony wanted to avoid it, Peter is a recognizable figure now. Leaving the apartment—even just to visit the facility upstate—has become too risky with the paparazzi lurking around every corner of the building, and so they have doubled down on their resolve to stay indoors. MJ and Ned help with some of the stir-craziness, but not all of it, not even close, and living in such constant anticipation, with so few opportunities to break up the monotony, has left everyone's nerves more than a little frayed. As evidence of this, Peter's nightmares have gotten steadily worse, to the point where Pepper and Tony have been taking it in shifts to check on him each night (despite Peter's reassurance that it is unnecessary, and that he is not, as he insists each time, five years old). Now that the day has finally arrived all three of them are jittery with nerves and sleeplessness, to the point where Tony is only half joking when he suggests his escape plan.

He's not surprised, though, that Peter said no. Peter may be struggling with some aspects of his decision, the nightmares being one, but he has been unwavering in his resolve to stick with it. Even now, with nothing but a single wall separating him from the man who is the source of all this discomfort, Peter does not back down.

"I'm good," says Peter firmly. "But—thank you, Tony."

Tony nods. Now is the time when he would, with anyone else, like to put a hand on a shoulder, or offer a pat on the back—but not with Peter. Because in addition to the nightmares, Peter has become increasingly jumpy as the court date has loomed closer. It's to the point now where he won't let anyone touch him. Not just Tony, whom he's always been tetchy about, but Pepper and his friends as well.

Still, the goon squad is on standby. They all agreed it was better for Ned and MJ not to come to the courthouse, though they wanted to: better not to drag any more teenage faces into the news

cameras' potential line of fire. They'll be at the penthouse this evening though. One way or another.

"And you remember what we're saying about Spider-Man?" says Pepper, glancing up and down the hall and lowering her voice. It's unnecessary; they are alone.

"If they want to know if I asked him to attack Skip, I say no."

"Which is not technically a lie," says Tony.

"But not technically the truth," says Peter.

"It's not their truth I'm worried about," says Tony. "And besides, anything else is irrelevant as far as your testimony is concerned, at least according to counsel. Don't let them trip you up—any other questions, you just point to your lawyer."

Peter smiles again. This time it is patient, like Tony is the kid here.

"I know," he says. "We've gone over everything four hundred times, I know what to say."

Tony swallows. Nods. Says, "Yeah. Okay. And just so you know, we're—"

"Proud of me," says Peter. "Yeah. I know that too."

Tony's throat suddenly feels very tight. He glances at his watch and sees they have another fifteen minutes before they're called in. He gets to his feet.

"Nature calls," he says. "Try to hold down the fort for once, why don't you, Pep? Jeez."

Pepper's answering smile is a pale imitation of exasperation. She mostly just looks fond.

Tony gets around the corner, but stops short of the men's washroom. The sound of reporters is quieter here, so he takes a moment to slump against the wall by the drinking fountain and massage his temples, resisting the urge to go inside and splash cold water on his face, not wanting to risk dampening his suit.

It's not just Peter that has him grappling for calm. It's the fact that fifteen minutes from now he is going to come face-to-face with Skip Westcott for the first time since they shook hands in his apartment two months ago. And when that moment comes, it is absolutely imperative that Tony have his wits about him.

Since the charges were dropped and then quickly raised again, Westcott has reversed his earlier strategy of quietly proclaiming his innocence from the comfort of his own home. Once it became clear that Peter wasn't going to back down, like the other boys did, Westcott and his lawyers went on the offensive, launching what has, unfortunately, become a popular campaign to uphold his status as a valued member of the greater New York City community. He's been interviewed by every major news outlet in the country, and this aggressive strategy has been disappointingly effective: there are entire Reddit communities dedicated to his defense, pages of 4Chan commenters proclaiming his innocence... even a few on websites whose userbases are not patently ridiculous to begin with. And if the paparazzi weren't bad enough, protestors have also appeared on the sidewalk outside the penthouse on more than one occasion, holding signs that say things like, "Hold Heroes Accountable," "Shame on Stark," and the less-pithy-but-most-cutting, "Using a kid to fake a rape: when will Avengers have THEIR day in court?"

The protestors, the idiotic internet commenters—these Tony can handle. At least, he can handle

them as long as Peter can, and so far the kid has been... incredible. Head up, no faltering, not in the face of any of it.

It's the goddamn Fox News piece that has Tony taking deep breaths now, reminding himself of the self-control he has learned and re-learned throughout these last weeks. It's not just that it's different seeing Westcott's smug face, churning out the same lines he has fed the papers over and over—though it is. It's what Westcott said at the end of the interview. His comment toward Tony. Warning him to be careful. Warning him that Peter might do the same thing to him.

The fantasies Tony's been having since the piece aired on Friday are too violent to speak out loud. And he knows he has to get them under control now if he wants to avoid the temptation of acting them out in the middle of a courtroom.

He gives himself a minute. Then he stands straight, tugs the sleeves of his jacket into place, and heads back down the hallway where Peter and Pepper are waiting.

Tony halts. At the end of the hallway, beyond the locked doors that are supposed to be keeping gawkers away from Peter, there stands a woman, peering through the glass.

Thinking a reporter has somehow broken free of the barricades on the courthouse steps, Tony starts forward, perhaps a little too eagerly, perhaps thinking he might let just a tiny bit of his frustration for Westcott out on someone else who roundly deserves it... but he only makes it two steps before he halts again.

The reason is this: he recognizes the woman. It's been two months since he's seen her, but she looks almost as disheveled as she did last time—hair piled on her head in a greasy, tangled bun, eyes red and tired behind wide-rimmed glasses. Not a hint of makeup. The only slight improvement over last time is in the fact that she has donned a suit for the occasion, but even that is in need of a powerful iron, and probably a wash.

Tony watches Margaret Esposito for a moment, wondering if she will turn and notice him and, if she does, what he will do. He knows he owes her an apology. He knows she is not here to get the story, like every other person who has appeared today, ready to sink their fangs into a fifteen-year-old kid for being brave enough to tell the truth. He knows this not only because Margaret Esposito was the first and only person to side with Peter in the first place, but also because she is looking right at Peter—who is staring at his knees—her gaze fixed, her eyes unblinking, her face unreadable.

For a moment, Tony thinks he should let her in. Would it hurt for the kid to know there was at least one person who was on his side the entire time? Even if that person wasn't able to help him the way she should have? The way everyone should have?

But of course it wouldn't. Peter is about to head into what will no doubt be one of the most difficult moments of his young life—and considering what he's already been through, that is no small thing. Anything else on top of that—even something potentially beneficial—is bound to be too much.

But before Tony can start forward once more, to tell Margaret, gently, that she has to leave, she turns abruptly on her own accord and, without looking at Tony, disappears.

In the opposite direction, near where Peter and Pepper are sitting, a door opens. A clerk sticks her head into the hallway.

"Mr. Parker?" she says. "They're ready for you."

“In the case of the State of New York vs. Steven Westcott, I’d like to remind attendees today that this is not a criminal trial. The purpose of this hearing is to assess the available evidence, and to determine whether said evidence is sufficient to establish probable cause, in which case we will proceed to a full trial.”

Judge Costina is a formidable latina woman in her fifties, her dark hair graying around her temples, wire-rimmed glasses perched on the edge of her nose. She peers through them at the small crowd gathered in the courtroom—the stenographer, the bailiff, Tony, Pepper and Peter, seated a few rows in... and, of course, Westcott and his lawyers, wearing suits and seated directly in front of the bench.

Westcott looked at them as they entered the courtroom. Just briefly. Just long enough to make eye contact with Peter, who halted when he met it. But only for a second. Before Tony could step in front of him, or warn Westcott to avert his fucking gaze before Tony averted it for him, Peter simply clenched his jaw, and his fists, and sidled into the row of seats where they are currently seated. Westcott looked away then. He hasn’t looked back since.

Peter has been staring at the back of his head this entire time. He’s not jiggling his knee anymore, but he’s holding himself so stiffly he seems to be vibrating slightly anyway. At one point Pepper had to lean over to remind him to take a breath.

Tony clenches his own fists in his lap and returns his attention to the front of the room.

“Before we begin review of the evidence,” says Costina, “would the defense like to make a statement?”

One of Westcott’s lawyers gets to his feet.

“Your honor, we move to dismiss outright,” he says. “The fact that this matter has been granted even a preliminary hearing is preposterous in the extreme. If my client is anything, he is a victim—and to force a man who has already been attacked in his own home, lost his children, and been publicly slandered on an international level to sit through a review of non-existent evidence is beyond a miscarriage of justice. I’m asking, your honor, that you end this farce of a case now, before it can do any more harm than it already has.”

“Motion to dismiss denied,” says Costina swiftly. “Thank you for that pretty speech, counselor, but I didn’t ask a fifteen-year-old boy to wade through the piranhas outside just so I could parade him back out without giving him a chance to speak.” She nods to Peter, whose shoulders are up around his ears, and who looks both grateful and mortified at being addressed directly. To the lawyer she says, “If there’s nothing else?”

The lawyer takes his seat.

“Good,” says Costina, “then let’s begin.”

Pepper grabs Tony’s hand, squeezes it. Her face is working furiously to contain the same expression Tony is sure is obvious on his own. It’s an expression of the same feeling he had the night Pepper climbed into bed with him, which has been at war with every terrible thought he’s had for the last five weeks. It’s hope.

Costina goes through some procedural stuff then—reading the charges, explaining how things will progress—but Tony doesn't follow much of it. He can no longer keep his focus on the bench, though Peter's is trained there. He knows this because all of his attention is on Peter now, watching him out of the corner of his eye as the moment draws nearer. He is still half-hoping Peter will back out; that he'll take Tony up on Acapulco and they can make a run for the private jet before any of this gets any further.

But when Costina says Peter's name, Peter doesn't even flinch.

"Mr. Parker?"

Trembling, Peter gets to his feet.

"Yes? Um. Ma'am? I mean—your honor?"

Costina smiles. It's gentle and hard at the same time.

"Given the nature of the charges and my understanding of the experiences you're alleging, and given the fact that this is a preliminary hearing, I'd like to offer you the choice between open testimony and a closed session. If you'd prefer, I can take your statement in my office. It will be on the record, and available to both sides, but you'd have some privacy. The choice is yours."

Westcott is looking at Peter again. Peter notices just a second after Tony does, but this time he doesn't look away, doesn't resume his seat. Just meets Westcott's eye and holds it, for the space of a long breath, which Peter seems to be holding.

In that moment, Tony thinks, *Just take it, kid. Take the easier road for once in your life. Give yourself the out.*

Then Peter lets the breath out, slowly. He looks away from Westcott, and up at the judge.

"I'll testify here," he says. "If that's okay."

Costina nods. Turns to the DA. "Prosecution?"

"We call Peter Parker to the stand, your honor."

Westcott turns back around as Peter slides past Tony and Pepper and into the aisle, where he makes the short trek to the witness stand alone. Even from a distance Tony can see him shaking as he swears in, and when he sits on the stand he stuffs his hands between his knees, hunched forward like he would like to curl up further but is forcing himself not to.

But still, he looks straight at Westcott as he does. Keeps looking at him, even as the prosecution approaches.

"Mr. Parker," says the DA, "in your own words, would you please describe your experience from the time you went to live with Steven Westcott to the time you ran away?"

Peter straightens up. He nods. And he begins.

When Peter is finished, Costina calls for a short recess. She dismisses him from the stand, and Tony and Pepper get to their feet—but they are only halfway toward the aisle when Peter pelts past them, straight toward the heavy double doors that lead out of the courtroom.

It's such an abrupt about-face from the extreme, almost unbelievable composure Peter displayed on the stand that it takes Tony and Pepper a moment to follow him. By the time they remember their feet and make it into the hallway, he is already disappearing around the corner that leads to the men's room.

"I got it," says Tony, halting Pepper. "Give us a minute."

Tony slides into the bathroom quietly. It doesn't have a lock, so he improvises one using the wrist gauntlet, then stands with his back against the door until the sounds of Peter vomiting in the far stall quiet down. When the toilet finally flushes, he says softly, "Kid?"

"I'm okay." Peter's voice is strangled. He spits. "I'm fine, I'm okay."

The toilet flushes again. There is a brief pause, then the door opens and Peter emerges, face red, eyes and nose running. Tony grabs a fistful of paper towels and wets them in the sink, maintains his distance as he holds them out to Peter while the latter struggles out of his suit jacket, loosens his tie. Peter accepts them, wipes his face off, and when he finally begins to catch his breath, looks down at his shoes.

"Okay," he says, "so that was the worst thing ever."

He laughs shakily. Tony once again battles the urge to put a hand on his shoulder. He leans against the sink instead, and crosses his arms over his chest. He is tempted to agree with Peter: that was the first time Tony has heard the whole story. The details, anyway, which he realizes in retrospect he never really wanted to hear. But even though he is still battling his own nausea, Tony simply says, "That was far and away the bravest thing I've ever seen someone do, Peter."

Peter laughs again, wipes his eyes on the back of his hand. "I don't feel very brave. It was just the truth."

"Feeling brave can come later," Tony says. "For now, take my word on it. Come on, kid. Let's get you something to drink. And maybe a mint."

A third laugh, this one a little less shaky than those preceding. Peter lets Tony take the lead, and follows him out of the bathroom.

They don't go back into the courtroom after meeting Pepper in the hall. She has already spoken to the bailiff, who pointed her in the direction of an unused jury room, where they can eat their lunch without being interrupted. Happy brings them sandwiches and joins them for the meal, which is one of the more subdued that Tony has ever taken part in. Pepper has become an expert in coaxing Peter to eat in the last few weeks, using just glances and gentle touch, but today is an especially tough battle; she ends up physically pressing the Italian sub into his hands, and watching him until he has finished half, something she hasn't needed to do since that first week they took him home.

Thankfully once he has eaten Peter *does* seem to perk up; the redness recedes from his eyes, and he even answers his phone when Ned calls, though he doesn't tell them anything about the testimony—they just ramble for a while about some PC game Ned is into, and Tony feels, for probably the millionth time, incredibly grateful for Mr. Leeds.

When lunch is over they decide not to go back into the courtroom. There are other factors for the court to consider, other evidence and lack of evidence and whatnot, but Peter doesn't need to be present for it, and thankfully he decides, for once, not to subject himself to unnecessary discomfort. He does, however, want to be there when the judge reaches a decision, so the four of them sit in the jury room and play card games, and fiddle with suit designs, and occasionally just sit quietly, passing the time until the bailiff comes to retrieve them—which happens sometime in the early evening.

The nerves, lessened somewhat in the wake of Peter's testimony, return full-force as they all file back into the courtroom and resume their seats on the hard wooden benches in the back. It's not just the three of them either: the air is so thick with anticipation Tony can practically taste it; a bitter-sweat taste that immediately crawls into the back of his throat and takes up residence there.

This time, Westcott does not turn around when they enter. The back of his neck is red, and beaded with sweat. Tony allows himself just a moment's fantasy—wrapping his gauntlets around that neck and squeezing—and then forces it away as the judge re-enters the chambers.

Pepper takes his hand again.

The judge runs through her procedures again. She re-states the issues at hand. And then, with a sigh, she looks up from her papers.

"I'm not going to mince words," she says. "There's no point in dragging this out. I've reviewed the available evidence and considered the testimony, and I've determined that there is not enough to establish probable cause in this case. I'm dropping the charges, and will not allow the case to proceed to trial at this time. Mr. Westcott—you're free to go."

There is a feeling in Tony's stomach as he watches Westcott get to his feet and embrace his lawyers, like the center of the world has just fallen away and he is now rushing toward a white-hot nothingness. This feeling is accompanied by a sudden, aching rush of noiselessness, which blots out everything around him—everything except Pepper, who is staring at the judge with such an expression of shock she might be in danger of passing out, and Peter, who is just looking at his hands, his face utterly blank.

Tony feels like he is moving underwater as he gets to his feet, following Pepper's gaze and watching as Judge Costina exits the courtroom.

"Wait here," he says. "I'll be right back."

Ten minutes later, when Tony bursts into Costina's office, she doesn't even look up from her computer.

"I realize this might be a novel idea for you," says the judge, "but some areas are restricted for a reason. My office is one of them."

But Tony hasn't recovered enough to be pithy right now. He shuts the door behind him with a snap and says, "What the hell was that?"

"Another novel idea: my verdicts aren't up for debate. Actually, no verdict is. Ever."

Tony crosses the room and shuts her laptop. She pulls her hands back just in time to avoid getting them caught, but it's a close thing.

Now she looks up.

"I could have you arrested for that," she says mildly.

"Yeah? Is that your schtick? Throw the guy who interrupts you in prison but let the child molester go free? Is that what passes for justice in this office?"

Costina takes a deep breath. She folds her hands on her desk. She nods at the chair in front of it.

"Why don't you take a seat, Mr. Stark?"

Instead, Tony starts to pace.

"Because I don't want to. Because I'm pissed off. Because I didn't think it was possible for me to *get* this pissed off."

"Mr. Stark, sit down."

"You didn't even give him a trial."

"I know. I was there."

"Do you have any idea what that kid *went through* to get up on that stand? Do you have any idea how hard it was for him to talk about that? With the fucking media digging their claws in, calling him a liar, calling him—and you just threw it out? Tell me, Judge Costina, which part of Peter's testimony did you find hardest to believe? Was it the part where he completely humiliated himself to try to protect kids like him from that monster? Or do you actually buy what the other side was saying about him? Because if you—"

"On the contrary," says Costina evenly, "I found Peter to be an extremely sympathetic and believable witness. And for the record, I believed every word he said."

Tony stops pacing, his mouth open. His reply never finds the open air. He just stares at her.

"What?" he says.

Costina sighs. She gestures to the chair again.

"Please take a seat," she says.

Tony drops into it, more out of shock than anything. Once he's seated, he finds his words.

"You believe him."

"I do."

"Then *how* could you have done that? How can you let a man like Westcott just fucking walk free knowing what he did?"

“By accepting the fact that I’ll probably lose a lot of sleep over it,” says Costina. “And because I believe it’s the only way Peter will see any sort of justice.”

Tony is silent for what feels like a full minute.

“You’re gonna have to break that one down for me, judge,” he says finally.

“You just mentioned the media, Mr. Stark. Despite your implication otherwise, I actually do pay attention to the news. I think you know what I’ve heard these last few weeks, but let me break it down for you just in case you’ve somehow missed it: right now, every major and minor outlet in the country is reporting on the poor orphan that Tony Stark adopted. Now, a very small percentage of those outlets are waiting until all the facts come in to make a judgment call, but that’s about the best that can be said about any of them. Do you know what the worst of them—that is to say, most of them—are saying?”

Tony grips the arms of his chair and doesn’t respond. Of course he knows. But he isn’t going to repeat it.

He doesn’t have to. Costina obliges.

“They’re saying this is a desperate attempt by a desperate man to cover up his latest superhero-related bungle. Half the world has turned against the Accords at this point, Mr. Stark. They’re saying they were rolled out too quickly, and without enough oversight. They’re saying incidents like the one with Spider-Man are evidence of this. They’re saying the man behind that rollout might be pretty desperate to save face. Maybe even desperate enough to take some poor, orphaned kid into his home—so long as that kid helps him make his pal Spider-Man look good.”

“That’s bullshit,” says Tony. “I’ve *publicly* denounced the Accords at this point, I know I made a mistake—”

“Now let’s imagine,” says Costina, cutting across him, “that the judge in charge of the case of the richest man in the world and the poor, orphaned kid he adopted, who is claiming the man Spider-Man beat up on his behalf is a rapist, decides to let that claim make it all the way to court. Do you think the papers will suddenly start reporting for Peter, will suddenly get on his side? Because I don’t. I think once the extent of the accusation reaches the public—which will be pretty fast, since it’ll probably be the highest-profile case since OJ—the press is going to dig, fast and hard. And here’s what they’ll find.”

She reaches under her desk and produces a thick manilla file folder, which she pushes across the desk toward Tony. He flips it open, but doesn’t have to look past the first page—he knows that photo by heart. It’s Peter’s CPS file.

“That’s supposed to be sealed,” he says, furious. “It’s not relevant to the case, you shouldn’t—”

“It took me about fifteen minutes to get a copy, Mr. Stark. Not an official copy, nothing admissible, but I know it came from CPS. They’re desperate to distance themselves from this, and they’ll do anything to discredit Peter’s claims, because they don’t want to be the organization that handed six young boys to a child molester. The press will get its hands on that eventually, and when they do Peter won’t just be the poor orphan who’s doing Tony Stark a favor so he has a place to stay. He’ll be the delinquent runaway who got his uncle shot, who shoved an old lady down a flight of stairs, who stole a knife from his halfway house and tried to use it on his roommate. Who was so resentful of his new foster dad he ran away again—maybe even resentful enough to make a few false accusations.”

Tony is shaking he's so angry. He's so angry he can't speak—which he didn't even know was possible.

It's the same line he fed Peter that night in the abandoned building. The same fucking line.

But apparently Costina isn't done.

"Or how's this one?" she says. "Maybe the news decides there's some truth to what the Parker kid is saying—just a little. Maybe something happened, but it was consensual—maybe Peter instigated. Kids like him, they're master manipulators. They'll do whatever they can to get what they want. And now he's worked his way up the chain, found himself a different older man, someone richer, higher-profile—"

Tony leaps to his feet. The chair falls over; the manilla file falls off the desk, spilling papers across the floor. But Costina doesn't even blink. Just gazes up at Tony while he breathes like a winded rhinoceros down at her.

He still can't say anything.

"At the end of all this," she says, "after Peter's been dragged through the mud and called every repellent name in the book—after he's so infamous he can't escape it anywhere—when the trial ends, and Westcott is declared innocent, will all of that really be worth it? Would you call that *justice*, Mr. Stark?"

"Westcott isn't innocent. You know he's not."

"I do. But a jury won't believe it. Not when the only evidence is the testimony of one teenage boy with a record, who has a lot to gain by saying it, and a lot to lose if he doesn't."

"Then why let him do that?" Tony says. "What was the point of that song and dance? Of putting him in front of Westcott like that?"

Costina says, "I thought he deserved the chance."

There is a prickling in the back of Tony's throat. He hasn't felt such a thing in so long it takes him a moment of standing there and swallowing to recognize his anger has morphed, suddenly and violently, into tears.

He hasn't cried in front of a stranger in twenty years. Hell, the only people he *knows* who he's cried in front of in that time are Pepper and Rhodey. He's not going to break that streak now, so he forces them back, though his voice is hoarse when he speaks.

"So that's it?" he says. "Peter gets fucked over no matter what?"

"Well," says Costina, "I guess that's up to you."

Tony takes a deep, deep breath before responding.

"What are you suggesting, Judge Costina?"

"All I'm suggesting," she says, "is that you give that boy what nobody else has given him since his uncle died: A good home. Proof that he's loved, cared for—believed. Whatever form that takes is up to you."

Before Tony can say anything else, she gets abruptly to her feet.

"I have other cases," she says. "If that's all?"

She holds a hand toward the door.

Tony clenches his hands into fists at his sides, unclenches before his fingernails can bite too deep into his palms.

"Thank you, Judge," he says, "for your time."

Back in the hallway, Peter and Pepper are sitting side-by-side on the bench where they sat that morning, and Happy, standing in front of them, is ensuring the courthouse's other occupants give them a wide berth. But even from this distance Tony can hear the clamor of reporters just beyond the front doors.

He clears his throat. They all look up. There is a flash of hope in Pepper's eyes—brief—but Peter's face remains carefully expressionless, which is somehow worse.

Peter doesn't expect anything. He knows better by now.

Which makes the *nothing* Tony has arrived with all the more difficult to stomach.

But Tony doesn't have a choice.

"Let's go home," he says.

Pepper and Happy work not to show their disappointment, but Peter's expression doesn't change a whit. He just gets to his feet.

Pepper catches Tony's eye as she stands as well. Tony shakes his head.

"Happy, bring the car around?"

"It's chaos out there boss. Are you sure—?"

"Peter," says Tony, turning to him, "the press is gonna swarm us as soon as we walk out these doors. Are you okay with Pepper and I sticking close?"

"It's fine," says Peter.

Tony nods at Happy, who nods back, jogs down the hall.

They stand still for a moment even after Happy is gone, giving him a moment to get to the car.

"Peter," says Tony, "I'm sorry, kid."

Peter shrugs.

"You tried."

"What you did up there was still the bravest thing I've ever seen."

"Thanks."

There is a stretch of silence, wherein Pepper and Tony exchange desperate glances over Peter's head. Then—

“Tony?”

They both look down at him.

“Is he gonna get any more kids? I mean... will he still be able to foster? At his apartment?”

Pepper beats Tony to it this time.

“No,” she says. “I already talked to our lawyers, Peter, they said there's no chance CPS is going to risk it. The accusation was enough. He won't foster kids ever again.”

Peter takes a deep, deep breath, looking steadily between Pepper and Tony, meeting each of their eyes.

“Good,” he says. “Then it doesn't matter. It was worth it.”

Tony desperately wants to hug him. This is a very strange and foreign feeling for Tony to feel about anyone who isn't Pepper, and it is made especially difficult by the fact that he knows he *can't*.

But it does matter. It *does*. Even if Peter says it was worth it, Tony can't stand the idea of him going through all of this and having to watch Westcott walk free anyway. That's not worth it to Tony.

It's not just that Tony can't stand for it.

He *won't*.

When he looks up again, Pepper is gazing at him, a knowing expression on her face.

But before either of them can do more than acknowledge the eye contact, Tony's phone chimes.

“That's Happy,” he says. “Let's go.”

It's not quite a hug, but it'll do for now: Tony wraps an arm around Peter's shoulder, gently at first and then more firmly when Peter doesn't flinch or shrug him off. On Peter's other side, Pepper does the same.

“Don't talk to anyone,” she says. “Don't answer any questions, and don't listen to what anyone says. Tony's done this a thousand times, so just follow his lead, okay?”

Peter just nods.

They walk through the courthouse doors together.

As Happy warned, it is chaos. The steps are swarmed with reporters, upwards of a hundred if Tony had to guess, but at first nobody is looking at them. They all have their cameras and microphones aimed at the other side of the stairs, where Westcott is standing next to his lawyer, speaking.

Tony doesn't mean to look. Slip past unnoticed, that's the ideal. But he can't help it; he hears the word *truth* come out of Westcott's mouth and his head snaps around.

He and Westcott lock eyes. It's brief—less than five seconds—but it's enough for Tony to meet the

unmistakable smug triumph in Westcott's eyes with an unmistakable expression of his own.

It says, *I'm coming for you.*

Westcott's smile falters, and the reporters see it. Someone shouts, "Peter!" and then nobody is looking at Westcott anymore.

Pepper and Tony press forward, arms over Peter's head, but too late: the crowd swarms them. Within a moment they are surrounded on all sides by a chorus of shouting—

"Peter, what do you have to say—"

"Peter, do you feel any remorse for—"

"Peter, what will you do now that—"

"Peter, what does Spider-Man think—"

"Peter—"

"Peter—"

"Peter—"

"*Pedro!*"

They are five feet away from where Happy is waiting on the curb when Peter stops dead. Pepper and Tony practically clothesline themselves with their own momentum; neither of them is a match for Peter's strength.

"Come on pal, almost there."

But when Tony looks at Peter's face, Peter is clearly not listening. He turns, wide-eyed, toward the swarm of reporters.

"Peter!"

This time it's Tony shouting Peter's name, but Peter ignores him, and, without saying a word, shakes himself loose from Tony and Pepper's grips and rushes into the crowd.

For a wild, irrational second Tony thinks the kid is about to attack someone—that one of the reporters must have said something to set him off. He hurries forward, ready to try to pull the kid back before he does something stupid and—

Peter doesn't attack. He reaches through the throng, shouldering and shoving until his body collides front-on with someone else's—and he wraps his arms around this nameless other. Not a reporter. A teenager. Taller than Peter, Hispanic and handsome and clearly not here for the scoop.

From the way the boys cling to each other, this is someone Peter knows.

There's no time to think on it: they've got to go. Tony thrusts an arm through the crowd and latches onto Peter's shoulder, drawing both boys' attention.

"I really hope you're old enough to climb into cars with strangers," he shouts, "because you're coming with us."

He yanks them back through the throng, but this time he and Pepper aren't necessary: this time the boy slings an arm protectively around Peter and puts his head down like a bull, barreling toward the car.

Somehow they all make it inside—Peter first, then the boy, followed by Pepper and Tony. Happy slams the door behind them, runs around the side to the front door.

And they drive off.

“Holy shit,” says the boy to Peter, while Tony and Pepper try to orient themselves. “How the fuck did you manage to raise your own fuckin’ lynch mob since I let you outta my sight, huh Pedro?” He brushes his hair out of his face, turns toward Tony, and sticks out a hand with a bravado even Tony finds impressive, especially considering the circumstances. “Felipe Cerna,” he says. “So tell me, Antonio—just what exactly the fuck are you gonna do about that bullshit back there?”

A Promise

The Italian restaurant in the corner of Central Park does not have a name. The flickering neon sign above its entrance simply says *Italian Food*, and to the casual observer it probably would not appear to contain even that. There are newspapers in the windows and graffiti on the door—sure signs of dilapidation, abandonment. But its regular customers—Tony among them—know better than to trust the restaurant’s outward appearance. Tony has been coming here for years, not only because it was one of his mom’s favorite Italian places when she was alive, but also because it’s just about the only joint in New York City that couldn’t care less about his face or his name—or whatever international disaster he’s gotten himself tangled up in this week. To wit, when Tony showed up half an hour ago with the whole gang in tow—Pepper and Happy and Peter and Felipe—the owner just smiled mildly, winked at Tony, and ushered them all into the back room.

This is where they are currently sitting, crammed shoulder-to-shoulder around a table piled so high with different meats and pastas that those of them on the side of the table opposite the door might actually have to eat their way through it if they wish to be able to exit the room.

Of course, none of them are actually eating. Happy and Pepper and Tony are pretending to: they are all in silent, mutual agreement that this meeting should be between the boys. But the room is too small and too quiet to afford any real privacy, and so really they are all listening as Felipe talks, while Peter, seated across from him, stares at him like he can’t quite believe he is real.

“After they took you,” Felipe is saying, “they finally got a new caregiver to replace Miss K. I think they must have gotten in some trouble or shit, because they got this real hardass, ex-military-type dude named Mr. Scott. He wasn’t nice or anything—like, he probably hated us just as much as Mr. Leonard or whatever—but he had a huge boner for following the rules. And that counted for everyone, not just us, so Ms. Charlise knew she couldn’t get away with not feeding me when he was around. She still tried whenever he was off, but our man Arnaldo came in clutch as soon as you were gone. I think he felt guilty for not speaking up the first time, you know, so he would sneak me part of his food on the days Mr. Scott was off, hide it in his napkin and slip it to me at bedtime and shit like that. It wasn’t enough for either of us, not by a long shot, but it was enough I didn’t feel like I was going crazy, like before. Which was good, ‘cuz I knew I couldn’t go nuts again. Any time I felt like I was gonna lose it, I just said to myself, ‘Pedro took that hit so you could get outta here, you asshole.’ I wasn’t gonna let myself throw that away.”

Peter has been swallowing convulsively almost since the moment they got in the car. He swallows again now and says, “I thought about you all the time, man. I wondered—I hoped they weren’t doing that to you again. I’m really sorry you—”

“Pedro, don’t you dare fuckin’ apologize. Not for one goddamn thing, you hear me?”

Peter swallows again, but falls silent. For a moment Felipe lets it hang, though Tony has the sense it is not in his nature. Then his hand gives a weird spasm and he lurches forward, grabs the nearest serving dish, and starts heaping spaghetti on Peter’s plate. He then does the same to his own and, pointedly, picks up his fork.

Smiling, Peter does the same. Felipe waits until he actually starts eating to resume his story.

“Anyway,” he says, “I managed it. It fucking sucked, but I kept my head down and I rode it out, and when it was time to send me home they didn’t have any reason not to let me go. That’s thanks to you, my man.”

"I barely did anything," says Peter sheepishly. "All I did was bleed all over the place."

"You saved my life, man."

Peter ducks his head, hides whatever emotion has just arisen by taking another bite.

Felipe clears his throat. For a second he seems as embarrassed as Peter, but only for a second. It is replaced by a stony determination.

"That's not all you did, Pedro. You stood up for me, yeah, but you stood up for *something*, and that was the thing that really got me. All the shit you had to deal with, all the shit they'd put you through... hell, even *I* was feeding you bullshit, telling you things were always gonna be bad, telling you not to care... Because I... I don't know. Maybe I thought it would be easier not to give a shit if I knew you didn't either. But you never listened, did you? You always gave a shit. Like you couldn't fuckin' help it or something.

"That stuck with me, Pedro. More than the food or the knife or all the crap they did to us boys over there, that stuck with me. And as soon as I got out I knew I couldn't just go back to keeping my head down and living my life. I just kept thinking, *What would that skinny little shit Pedro do if he was me?*" Felipe picks up his fork, takes a tentative bite. He looks almost nervous, like he's afraid Peter will judge him for his self-congratulations, when he says, "I don't know if you know what I did when I got out, man, but—"

"I do." Peter reaches into his pants pocket and digs out a crumpled piece of paper that Tony didn't know he was carrying, slides it across the table to Felipe. Tony recognizes it; it's the same paper Peter was clutching that night in the warehouse, but only now is he close enough to see that the news article contains a picture: a handsome boy on the courthouse steps, accompanied by an older woman. The boy is Felipe. "You... Felipe, you did what I wish I had done. Sorry. I don't mean to be... corny, I guess. But... knowing you had done this? It saved me too."

Now it is Felipe's turn to swallow convulsively. He does this several times, but it doesn't seem to help. His voice still quavers when he says, "How can you say that, man? How can you not fuckin' hate me?"

Peter draws back, startled and bemused. "Hate you? Felipe, I—"

"It shoulda been me."

Peter shuts his mouth abruptly. Felipe nods, apparently taking this as affirmation.

"It was my knife." A tear falls, and Felipe swipes at it furiously. "My fucking knife. My dumbass decision. And because of it you got sent to that—that—"

But even foul-mouthed Felipe cannot seem to find a word dark enough to describe Skip Westcott.

Peter doesn't seem to care. He reaches across the table. His sleeve brushes the spaghetti, gets covered in sauce, but he doesn't seem to care about this either. He grabs Felipe's wrist and holds it until Felipe looks up at him.

"Felipe," says Peter. His voice is low and urgent and sounds older, even older than it did on the stand, holding his attacker's gaze and his own composure. "Listen to me, man. Saving you? Knowing maybe you got out? That you got to see your mom? Sometimes that was the only thing that kept me going. Please don't blame yourself. It wasn't your fault what happened, but you were the reason I... the reason I lived through it. You saved me too, dude. I could never hate you."

Felipe's mouth falls open. He looks gobsmacked. It takes him a full thirty seconds to gain even a semblance of his self-composure, during which time all of the adults in the room become suddenly and intently focused on their plates.

When Tony looks back up, Felipe is wiping his eyes, and Peter is withdrawing his hand.

"Why you gotta be so goddamn smart all the time, huh Pedro?"

Peter smiles again. "Hey," he says, "I gotta have something going for me. 'Mad Dog Pedro' didn't exactly pan out."

Felipe snorts. Takes a deep breath, then another bite of his pasta. When he is finished chewing he says, almost shyly, "I did get to see my mom, though. I live with her again, actually. She's doing good, man. Like, she's actually doing really, really good. After what happened with me and the drugs she kicked José to the curb, and she's been working on her shit ever since. She's got a job again. I mean, I do too, just after school and stuff, but between the two of us we're doing okay. It's hard sometimes, but she really wants to make up for what happened when I was a kid. She even got her ninety-day chip last week."

"Felipe, that's amazing."

Felipe nods. "And Mariña, she's doing good too. She's still staying with my abuela until my mom can really get back on her feet, but we see her every weekend. She just won first place at her science fair, look."

Felipe pulls out his phone and holds it out to Peter without pulling anything up. The picture is his background. Peter grins at it until Felipe withdraws.

"And uh..." Now Tony is sure Felipe sounds sheepish. In contrast to Peter earlier, Felipe sounds younger now. Less like a modern James Dean wannabe and more like the sixteen-year-old kid he is. "It actually turns out, um, I'm not so dumb myself. Turns out it's just kinda hard to be good at school when you got shit like drugs and jail to worry about. Since I got out, I've been doing really good in my classes. Some of my teachers think if I keep it up I can even get a scholarship. To a good school, even, not a shit one. And I think I'm gonna do it, man. I wanna do something good with all the chances I got. I wanna figure out how to help kids like us."

"You're going to," says Peter. "I'm really proud of you, Felipe."

"I'm proud of you too, Pedro." Felipe's smile fades. "I'm so sorry, man. I wish you coulda seen the look on Ms. Charlise's face when they convicted her. You shoulda seen the same thing today."

Peter's smile fades too. He looks down at his plate.

"Yeah," he says, shrugging, "well."

Felipe's lip starts to tremble again, but this time, instead of letting the tears come, he sets his jaw and furrows his brow and says, "Well. You got me now, got it? Anyone gives you shit—"

"You gonna knife 'em for me?"

Peter looks up from under his hair, grinning, tentative but still cheeky. Felipe grins too.

"You say that like you don't believe I'm still a badass, Parker."

"Uh, first of all, when were you ever? And second of all, you're in here with pictures of a fourth

grade science fair man, how much of a badass can you be?"

"More than you'll ever be, jackass." Felipe ruffles Peter's hair affectionately. "For real though, you and me—we're gonna be solid from here on out, right? 'Cuz I didn't track you all the way to the courthouse just so I could have one plate of pasta with the Tony Stark posse staring at me like they never seen a young Mexican stud before. No way. We're gonna hang out. Like, for real."

"Yeah," says Peter. "Yeah, I would really like that."

"Good." Felipe leans back in his chair, digs his fork into his pasta, and takes his first real bite of the night. "Because I *know* you didn't think you were gonna get out of this friendship without ever introducing me to Spider-Man."

Peter blushes at that, but continues to smile. "I don't know, man," he says, "he's kind of a private dude."

"Of course he is. All Mexican men know how to keep a low profile."

"Excuse me, what?"

"Oh, come on. You can't tell me you think Spider-Man is some *white boy*? That mask *screams* luchador. My man is Mexican all the way, I guarantee it."

Peter, grinning widely now, casts a sideways glance at Tony.

"You know what, Felipe?" he says. "He could be."

They settle into a more participatory rhythm after that, at least as far as the adults are concerned. Happy is completely unsure how to react to the constant stream of curse words that is Felipe, but Pepper, able to take everything in stride, evens him out. Felipe interrogates them all about Peter's living conditions, drops several not-so-subtle hints that Tony should buy Peter a vintage Ferrari at his earliest convenience, and is generally such a pleasant combination of upbeat and offbeat that by the time the meal is finished, Tony can almost believe that the last few happy hours were not preceded by some of the worst he has ever experienced.

Almost. The cloud of the day's prior events recedes, but does not abate. It surges forth again every time there is a lull in the conversation, and the resultant downpour drums a furious beat in Tony's mind: *Westcott got off. Westcott got off. Westcott got off.*

When he is not talking, Tony is using this beat as a metronome for his own metered hatred.

He knows he has to be meticulous. Whatever he does next, he can't be sloppy. Vengeance, this time, will require precision.

As it turns out, Tony is not the only one who still has Westcott on his mind.

Later, when they are leaving the restaurant—Pepper and Happy going first, flanking Peter in case they catch prying eyes on their way to the car—Felipe catches Tony by the arm and pulls him back. Tony takes one glimpse at his face—noticing for the first time that Felipe is taller than he is when he does—and there is no trace of a boy there anymore. The person speaking to Tony now is a

man.

“We can chat about cars all day, Antonio,” he says, “but we both know there isn’t a car fast enough or expensive enough to fix what happened to my man back there. I’m not bullshitting you now, so you tell me straight okay? Are you gonna do something about that scumbag?”

Tony glances over Felipe’s shoulder, where Pepper is standing by the open car door, looking expectantly at Tony. He looks away. Meets Felipe’s eye.

“Yes, Mr. Cerna,” he says, “I am.”

Felipe nods, just once, stiffly.

“Then you gotta make me a promise.”

“I can probably do that.”

“Fuck him up, Mr. Stark. Fuck him up good.”

He sticks a hand out, and Tony, without hesitating, shakes it.

They drop Felipe off at home. Tony notes the address. Peter might be a year or two out from needing a car of any sort, let alone a vintage sports car, but Felipe Cerna is going to have one in his driveway by this weekend.

As they head back toward the apartment, Tony can see the elation of having been reunited with his old friend fading from Peter’s expression, until there is only a whisper of a smile there, faint and almost bemused. By the time they are three blocks out, he is looking at his hands, brow furrowed, as though he is working through a difficult riddle.

Tony braces himself. It was only a matter of time before they had to address what happened in the courthouse. He’s been thinking of what to say the entire ride over.

But when Peter opens his mouth, something unexpected emerges.

“I think I want to go back to school.”

Tony and Pepper’s mouths both drop open at the same time, but Pepper is the first to recover herself enough to speak.

“You... are you sure, Peter? You don’t have to rush anything, especially not today.”

“No.” Peter is watching the city rush by through his window. He shakes his head. “I mean, yeah. I’m sure. It’s not rushing it. It’s, um... it feels like maybe it’s time to you know, get out of the apartment. And no offense or anything, but I think you guys should get back to your lives and stuff. It’s cool what you’ve done, you know, taking all this time off to... to take care of me and stuff, but just watching me all day has got to be pretty boring at this point.”

“I don’t know, Pete. You know how to keep things exciting.”

Peter smiles. “Maybe not so much now that... now that everything is over.”

There is a short pause.

“Okay,” says Pepper. “If you’re really ready, I can start looking into places, get things—”

“I wanna go back to Midtown.” Peter brings his gaze around. “I know it’s not gonna be... easy or whatever, but... I don’t know. I’ve been talking to Ned and MJ, they said most people still believe me even after... and it doesn’t matter anyway. What people think, I mean. There are gonna be people who think I’m a liar no matter where I go, so I might as well go somewhere I have my friends. And I miss it. I miss school. And... just being a regular kid.”

Pepper still looks doubtful. She opens her mouth, maybe to object, but Tony cuts her off.

“Sure thing, kid. We’ll get you set up.”

Peter nods. He appears to consider his next words carefully, to the point where Tony isn’t sure he’s actually going to say them. But eventually Peter musters the courage.

“I was thinking, too... about Spider-Man.”

“Oh. Sweetie. That’s—”

“Peter Parker might be one thing,” says Peter, cutting across Pepper, “but I think people are still gonna be mad about Spider-Man. And I can’t... I know it might not make a lot of sense, but I can’t *not* be Spider-Man. I feel like... *half* when I’m not... when Spider-Man isn’t...”

Peter trails off. Words might be insufficient, but they are also unnecessary. Everyone in this car knows exactly what he means, because Tony is the same way.

“So I was thinking,” Peter goes on, “maybe we could, um... rebrand? I mean, the spider thing was kind of incidental and even though it definitely made sense, there’s lots of other stuff that sticks to walls and is super strong. I guess Ant-Man is taken, but maybe like a fly thing? Fly-Guy? Except I can’t really fly, so—”

“Hold up,” says Tony. “Just—wait. Didn’t I say you weren’t gonna have to give Spider-Man up, Pete?”

Peter seems to deflate, just a little.

“Tony,” he says, “they let Skip go. And if they let Skip go, that means there was no reason for Spider-Man to beat him up. He’s—*I’m* a criminal. And even if the police don’t try to arrest Spider-Man the next time he shows up, who’s gonna let him help? As long as they think he’s a crazy vigilante—”

“I told you I’m going to take care of it.”

They’re all looking at Tony now—even Happy is staring through the rearview mirror—but their expressions are all different. Peter looks doubtful. Happy looks wary. And Pepper—Pepper looks like she is peering straight into Tony’s head, like his forehead is made of glass. And she doesn’t like what she sees.

Tony ignores her for now.

“Put Fly-Guy on hold, Pete,” he says. “Just for a week or two. If I can’t work something out by then we’ll reassess, okay?”

Peter nods, though he still looks skeptical. If he means to express these concerns, however, he isn't granted the opportunity: they have arrived at the penthouse, and the goon squad awaits.

Ned and MJ take the lead for the rest of the night. Ned has arranged a buffet of artery-clogging snacks on the coffee table. MJ has lined up a marathon of classic horror movies. They gather on the couches and if they talk at all about the events at the courthouse, Tony doesn't hear it, because the moment they are settled Pepper drags him into the elevator and onto the roof.

It's where they've been meeting to talk ever since the night Hill came to tell them about the dropped charges, the only nearby place where they can be sure Peter won't overhear them. Over the last five weeks it has become a place of sanctuary—away from the constant stream of media input and the suffocating feeling of being perpetually indoors—but tonight being up here is not a relief. It's November now, and there is a harsh chill in the air. This chill is matched only by the chill in Pepper's voice when she slams the access door behind her.

"You're not going to do it, Tony."

"You're gonna have to be more specific, Pep."

"Do not *even* try to be smart with me right now. We both know what you're planning, and this is not a discussion. It's over, Tony. We tried, we lost. Now you *let it go*."

"Maybe you weren't in the same courtroom as me earlier, but did you notice how the guy who molested our kid just got turned loose? Not even a slap on the wrist? I don't know about you, Pepper, but that's not the kind of thing I can just *let go*."

"Don't you dare." Pepper advances on him, presses a finger into his chest. "Don't you *dare* imply that I care less about this than you do, Tony Stark. You think I don't wish I could go knock his door down as much as you do right now? You think it makes me a bad person that I'm not going to let myself?"

Tony wraps a hand around her wrist. He lowers his head.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I shouldn't have said that, I'm sorry."

Pepper unfurls. She places the hand on his chest, her forehead to follow.

"I want him punished," she says, voice muffled by Tony's shirt and the cold wind. "But I want you here more. It isn't worth the risk. It just isn't."

"What if there wasn't a risk?"

Pepper raises her head.

"Tony..."

"I know. I know. But what if I could do it without losing all this? What if I can be smart about it?"

"This isn't one of your suits. It's not an equation. It's not even one of your usual enemies. Westcott goes missing, you're the first person they're going to look at, and you know you can't—"

"I'm not talking about murder," says Tony. "I'm talking about justice."

"What do you mean?"

"What if I can get him without ruining this? Without ruining Peter's life either?"

Pepper presses her lips together, searching his face.

"How?"

Tony sighs. "I'm not sure yet. I'm thinking it through. I have an idea I just... need a little time."

"Tony."

"I know. Pepper, I know. But... what if I promise?"

"Promise what? Promise not to hurt Westcott?"

"No. What if I promise I won't make things harder for Peter? That I won't let any of it get in the way of... this. Of us. Of... being a family."

Pepper takes a deep breath through her nose. "Can you?" she says. "Can you promise that?"

"I think so. And if I can't, how about this? I just won't do it."

"In all the years I've known you, Tony, you have never *just* not done something. Not if it's something you want to do. If I'm remembering right, that very issue has caused some tension for the two of us in the past."

Tony wraps an arm around Pepper's shoulders. He pulls her close, and kisses her on the forehead.

"I know," he says, "which is why I'm going to make sure I don't mess this one up."

Westcott is stumbling by the time he makes it into the lobby. Not much; he's big and he's used to drinking, so even after downing enough to knock out any other grown man, the lilt in his step is barely noticeable. Or, only noticeable to someone who is looking for it. Someone who has been watching. But it is there, just as it has been every night for the last week, which is how long Tony has been keeping an eye on Westcott's apartment. Watching security cameras to familiarize himself with the routine which, so far, has varied throughout the day—he alternates between hours spent in the gym and hours spent on the phone, with news outlets and publishers mostly, trying to capitalize on the Dad-of-Midtown story, for which the media is clamoring. But at night it is consistent. At night, without fail, Westcott leaves his apartment and heads for the bars, and he does not return until he has finished six whiskey doubles—all of which are paid for by his fellow patrons, most of them women, all of whom are just itching to hear the story of the poor, handsome man who lost his kids because of Spider-Man. For the first few nights, Tony worried Westcott might decide to take one of these women home. But by tonight he knows better. Tonight, as always, Westcott comes home alone.

He won't be for long.

The screens inside Tony's glasses switch from the lobby cameras to the elevators as Westcott

boards one. Once inside, Westcott lets some of his composure drop; he staggers a little, catches himself against the wall.

Inside Westcott's apartment, Tony gets to his feet.

It's dark in the living room, which is where Tony has been sitting for the last hour. He has not turned the lights on. Nor has he gone deeper into the apartment.

He's just been waiting, seated in the same worn leather armchair where, months ago, Westcott served him tea and false tears and lies about Peter that Tony still can't forgive himself for believing. But as he hears Westcott fumble to fit his key in the lock, Tony rounds the couch into the entranceway, where he stands with his arms crossed and his eyes trained on the door until it opens and Westcott reaches for the lights.

When Westcott looks up and sees Tony standing in his foyer, a brief paroxysm of shock ignites his face, but it is just that—brief. If the timing was unexpected, Tony's appearance clearly was not, because after just a second of swaying and staring, Westcott grins.

"Well," he says, "isn't this a surprise."

"Apparently not."

Westcott closes the door behind him.

"Care for a drink, Stark?"

"It's not a social call."

"Of course not." Westcott slides around Tony into the kitchen anyway. Tony lets him pass. "You're all business, aren't you, Stark? What was it you said last time? *Never a bad time for charity*? Well, you're certainly a man of your word, aren't you?" He reaches into a cabinet, pulls out a bottle of some unlabeled brown liquor and pours himself a generous glass. "Who would have thought the great Tony Stark would be so quick to take in a poor little orphan like Peter?"

"Why is it," says Tony, moving so that he is on the other side of the kitchen island, across from Westcott, and perching on one of the stools there, "that only bad guys ever call me 'the great Tony Stark'? I'm *objectively* great, but no one on the right side ever seems to mention it. But then, you never do get it both ways. One of life's little quirks, I guess. Like how pedophile pieces of shit sometimes get to just... walk free. *Uncanny*."

Westcott leans a hip against the counter. Sips his drink.

"Still think I'm the bad guy, then? Peter really has got you wrapped around his little finger. But I guess I'm not surprised. He always was too smart for his own good."

"I'm smarter," Tony says. "And we're both smarter than you. You might have the media fooled, Skip, but I'd avoid talking shit about Peter in front of me if you'd like to keep your tongue in your mouth."

"Come on, Stark. We both know you're not here to hurt me."

"You're sure about that?"

Westcott continues to smirk. "You would have come for me ages ago if you thought you could get away with it. You know the press is on my side. You know the world is on my side. And doesn't

that make you think, Stark? Doesn't it make you wonder, even a little bit, if all the crap Peter's fed you is true? You've seen his record. You know what he's capable of."

"It's just you and me here, Skip. We can both drop the charade."

Westcott's answering grin looks more like a snarl.

"Is that why you're here then? Trying to make me slip up, admit to something I didn't do? Because for such a *smart man*, that seems like a pretty weak plan to me."

"Oh, I bet it does. I can see how, to someone like you, that would seem like a really foolish plan. What would you do in my position? Can I take a stab at it? Would you try to convince the lowlife rapist that nobody gave a shit about him? Would you tell him that if he came forward with even a fraction of the truth about what was happening, he would ruin the lives of the last people in the world he loved? Or would you just tell him he was special? That he wasn't like the ones who came before him, to make him feel like anything that happened to him was not only his fault, but that he was absolutely alone? Does that sound about right? Does it, Skip?" Tony leans back on his stool. "I'm guessing not. Because neither one of us is a fourteen-year-old kid, are we, Skip? You and I are both men. So. Let's talk like men."

Tony nods at the stool on the other side of the island. Westcott hesitated for a second, then lowers himself to sit, still wearing his leering grin.

"So you are here to threaten me," he says. "Go on then. What's the threat?"

"What? Oh, no. No, no. Sorry, I can see how listing your crimes back at you might have seemed threatening, but this isn't a *threat*, Skip, old pal. No, this is more like a courtesy call. A nice chat between a landlord and a tenant."

Finally, Westcott's smile falters. Finally, Tony has caught him off-guard.

He's not going to speak, though. Not going to betray any more confusion than he already has. Skip Westcott is a man who knows how to play his cards close to his chest, to not strike until he is absolutely certain he can land a fatal blow.

He's not going to land one tonight.

Tony goes on.

"Did you not get my email? Damn spam filters. I'm sure it'll show up with a little digging though, all nicely time-stamped with the proper amount of notice and whatever it is New York City wants as proof that I didn't just drop in here unannounced."

There is no mistaking it now. Westcott's snarl has turned into a sneer.

"I don't have a landlord," he says.

"Actually, as of earlier this week, you do."

Tony pulls his phone out of his jacket. He pulls up a holograph of the deed to the unit in which they are currently sitting, zooms in on his signature, right next to the signature of the former owner—one Melissa Westcott.

Westcott stares at it. A muscle in his jaw is twitching. He does not speak.

“You made a mistake, Skip.”

Westcott looks up, meets Tony’s eye. Still says nothing.

“Your wife left you after your son died, isn’t that right? That’s a hypothetical question, by the way. I already talked to Melissa earlier this week. She wasn’t eager, at first. I have to say, you must have done a number on her while the two of you were together. Fifteen hospital visits over ten years.” Tony dismisses the deed with a swipe of his hand, pulls up a decade-old picture of a pretty woman with dark hair, her face smattered with bruises. “Melissa used to be pretty clumsy when she was married to you. Maybe even prone to self-harm. At least, that’s what you convinced her to tell the doctors every time she had to get another x-ray, another cast. She still didn’t want to say otherwise when I went to visit her, but once I convinced her that you were never going to see the outside of a prison cell after tonight, she got a little more eager to tell her side of things. You wanna hear her side of things, *buddy*?”

“Whatever Melissa told you,” says Westcott, “she’s lying.”

“No,” says Tony evenly, “she’s not. Though she was for a long time. She’s been lying ever since she got up the courage to leave your smarmy, ugly ass after she realized what you had done to her son. See, Melissa was pretty confident his suicide had something to do with you and the late-night ‘talks’ the pair of you had in his room. But she didn’t have any proof, and worse—she had a daughter to protect. That was how you convinced her to keep her mouth shut, wasn’t it? You told her if she blabbed—told anyone what you actually are—you would sue for full custody of Megan. And you knew you’d win, because you’d been covering your tracks for years. What court wouldn’t give custody to the charity-driven, overemployed, community-respected dad over the unemployed stay-at-home mom with a history of mental illness and self-harm?” Tony pauses for a moment, stares at Melissa Westcott’s battered face. “I met your daughter, too, by the way. She’s smart. Funny. Lucky, to have escaped you when she did. Megan’s fifteen now. Same age as Peter.”

Tony closes the hologram.

“Melissa also knew,” he says, “that if she told the truth about you, you would cut Megan off. So that was the deal: her silence, in return for her one remaining kid’s security. I don’t envy her having to make that choice.

“But it turns out you hadn’t *totally* broken her. Melissa kept her wits in at least one way. She didn’t give away the whole farm. She kept some collateral.” Tony gestures around the apartment. “A wedding gift. From her father. Always in her name. Never in yours. She let you stay here, didn’t she, and in return you left the pair of them alone. But not anymore. You’ll be happy to know that Melissa got a very generous offer for the place. She isn’t going to have to worry about Megan’s future anymore. Not even a little bit.”

The knuckles on the hand clutching the glass of liquor have gone completely white. Yet Westcott still manages an affectation of casualness when he replies.

“Is this your big plan for revenge?” he says. “To make me move? Is the purview of post-Accords Avengers just going to be mild inconvenience?”

“You’re not moving anywhere,” says Tony. “Oh—did you miss that memo too? Or maybe I’m just ahead of the curve. I have some contacts in the FBI, see, so I sorta get the inside scoop. Well, Skip, I hate to be the one to break this to you, but you’ve been flagged as a possible participant in some insider trading way back in the early two thousands. Our friends the feds are in the process of freezing all of your accounts as we speak.”

Westcott's hand slips. Liquor splashes across the counter.

"I was never involved in any insider trading," he says. "That's bullshit."

"Well, maybe you were and maybe you weren't. Either way, the investigation is going to take months. Maybe years. I heard they might even have to seize your other assets. Rough stuff. I hope you have a friend you can crash with, Skip, because to be honest I don't think you've got the constitution to survive on the streets. That's the kind of thing that takes actual smarts. Actual guts. Neither of which you have.

"There is one bright spot in this bleak landscape laid out before you. I'm sure you'll be delighted to hear that my friends and I finally got in touch with DeMarcus Smith, and even though *your* funds are being cut off, his tuition will be fully covered. That *is* why he backed out of his testimony, isn't it? You told him you'd cut the cash if he talked. Money is *such* a monster, isn't it? Well—unless you're the person who has the most of it. Which, you know, for once you're not. He's still a little reluctant to talk, though."

Westcott is trembling with rage now, but he still manages to say, "Maybe because there's nothing to say."

"Or because he saw what happened to Peter. I'm not blaming DeMarcus, to be clear. I'm blaming you for behaving like the filth you are, and making him think he had to choose between telling the truth and getting an education. But I'm thinking the choice might be a little easier for him after tonight. After the whole world has seen you for what you are."

"You're kidding, right? You haven't proven anything. All you've done is come in here and slung your dick around like you own the place, which is all you've ever done. Your entire legacy summed up in one act of petty revenge."

"To be clear," says Tony, "I *do* own this place. I hope I wasn't being too obtuse about that. And also, just to reiterate, I'm kicking your ass out. But, much as I hate to admit it, you're right. Nothing's really changed as far as your guilt is concerned, has it? At least, not in the eyes of the people who matter. Except, I guess, for the little video I'm making."

Tony taps two fingers to the side of his glasses. Westcott's brow furrows in confusion, then relaxes as he understands—and once again, he grins.

"That's your plan?" There is laughter in his voice now, unmistakable. "Really, Stark? Really? Did you not learn anything from that court case? You can't just break into my home, threaten my livelihood, and—what? Force a confession out of me? I don't know if you've ever heard of blackmail, jackass, but that's what they call it. You'll get the case thrown out faster than last time."

Tony gets to his feet abruptly. Abruptly enough that Westcott actually jolts back a little, though he gathers himself quickly.

"Actually," says Tony, "*my* research indicates that it's a nice little mix of blackmail *and* extortion. Kind of a gray area, actually. But this isn't for the police, dickless. This is more of a home movie. A project in posterity, if you will."

Tony steps closer to Westcott, whose confusion has returned, full-force. He leans back again. It's a satisfying change: Skip Westcott is a man who only has power when his control is absolute, and now it is slipping; Tony has him on the ropes.

"I don't know if you've heard," says Tony, "but me and a few of my friends had a bit of a falling

out of late. We don't really see much of each other these days. None of them are on Facebook, it's a real shame. So I'm thinking a little video diary, what do you think? A little missive to the long-lost Rogue Avengers?"

"Now it really seems like you're threatening me, Stark."

"Oh, no. In case I wasn't before, let me be very clear on that point. As my lovely girlfriend has pointed out to me repeatedly, I would never, ever get away with threatening you. I'm too close to this thing. And I'm not about to risk Peter's happiness just to see you squirm like the invertebrate we all know you are, no matter how much I might want to. So let me just state for the record—on the very remote chance that this little video finds its way into the hands of the public—that I, Anthony Edward Stark, would never threaten you, Skip Westcott, with any sort of bodily harm, regardless of how much I might like to pull your guts out through your throat.

"My friends on the other hand..."

Westcott goes pale. It's very satisfying. Tony takes another step toward him.

"You know," Tony says, "I should probably be extra clear here. For your sake as much as mine. Natasha, if, by some miracle, this video does make it into your hands, I *absolutely do not* want you to disembowel this man and strangle him with his own entrails. And Wanda—you and I have had our differences, so you know I would never suggest that, if the opportunity arose, you figure out whatever this subhuman scumbag's worst nightmare is and trap him in it for the rest of his life. And Steve..." Tony takes a deep breath. "Well, our argument was pretty well-publicized, wasn't it? Every news outlet reported on how hurt I was. How betrayed I felt. Which is why I'm sure no one would believe that I would ever be able to set that betrayal aside long enough to ask Captain America to come back to New York City and brain you with whatever it is he's using as a shield nowadays. That would be preposterous."

Now, in addition to his pallor, Westcott has started to shake. Tony is very close to him now. He gets to his feet, but stumbles, has to catch himself on the counter and then lean against it as he tries to look Tony in the face.

"They're fugitives," he says. "Any one of them shows their face in the city and they're done for."

"Oh, you're so right. How could a Russian super-spy, a man who once snuck into Nazi Germany to save his platoon, and a woman who can literally control minds possibly hope to get into the city long enough to cream one pedophile? What was I so worried about? Wow, Skip, I guess it really is your lucky day. Unless... FRIDAY, I'm still a little concerned for our friend Skip's safety. Tell me, is there anyone based in New York who *isn't* on the run from the law, and wouldn't have any problem turning this skin suit into living room carpet?"

"Known enhanced vigilantes living within the city include Jessica Jones, Daredevil, Luke Cage, and the Punisher," says FRIDAY, voice piping through the glasses. "Iron-Fist occasionally makes an appearance as well."

"Well, shit," says Tony mildly. "It's a superhero wingding here in New York, who knew? I mean, they might not exactly be *Avengers* level, but—well, gosh, FRIDAY. How many of those guys do you think would take issue with putting their genetically-enhanced feet up Mr. Westcott's ass?"

"I don't think any of them would have a problem with that, boss."

"Not one of them." Tony feigns mild surprise. "Of course, I would never ask them to. But from what I hear about those particular individuals, they don't mind taking matters into their own hands,

particularly not when those matters involve subhuman scum like you clogging up their streets. Might not be super safe for you out there, is my point here, Skip, and since the streets are where you're about to live..." Tony trails off with a shrug.

The smugness is utterly gone from Skip's face now. Fear is battling inebriation as he stands against the kitchen island and sways slightly, and fear is winning out. His eyes dart back and forth—from the exit to the hallway to living room, as though they are searching for a physical escape from this abrupt shift in circumstance.

Finding none, they land on Tony.

"You son of a bitch," he says. "You stupid motherfucker."

"You don't really have a leg to stand on here, Skip, so you might want to watch your language."

"Fuck you," Westcott spits. "You think I'm going to just give in? I didn't give in when your little shit of a kid sicced his super-freak friend on me. Or was that you, too?"

"No," says Tony, and for the first time this evening there is a sharpness to his voice. "Nobody sicced Spider-Man on you. He just happens to be one of the few people left in this city who can actually tell the difference between right and wrong. But he's not a part of this anymore. This is just you and me."

"Then I'll see your ass in court."

"Oh, you're welcome to try." At last, Tony closes the space between them. He and Westcott are just a foot apart now, and even though Westcott is much taller, Tony can see him battling the urge to back away. "But I think you'll find there's a big difference between going after a kid and going after me. Peter deserved his say. He deserved dignity, and he deserved the truth. But I already know the truth, and I've never troubled myself too much with dignity. I'll burn both of us to the ground if that's what it comes to. If that's what it takes to make the world see you for what you are. Fucking test me."

Now Westcott can't help it. He takes a minute step backward, but it's useless; Tony follows him.

"That's your first option, Skip. You already know option number two. You take your chances out in the real world. You go homeless, just like Peter did for five months because of what you did to him, and you pray to whatever god you believe in that you make it that long when every enhanced individual on the planet is playing Most Dangerous Game with your sorry ass. What do you think, Skip? You think they care what the courts said? You think they're gonna go easy on the Dad of Midtown? Or do you think maybe a group of misunderstood, misfit vigilantes are gonna go with one of their own? Because personally, even if they don't care what I have to say, I think they'll side with Spider-Man. They should, if they have any inkling of how good he is."

Tony takes one final step forward, and Westcott is out of room: his back jars against the fridge when he takes a step back. He holds himself there, panting and snarling like a cornered dog. There is no way out, and finally Westcott knows it.

And yet—Tony still has one more thing to say.

"You have a third option."

Westcott goes still. He says nothing, but the question is there behind the fight instinct in his eyes. He waits to hear what Tony will say.

“Personally,” says Tony, and now he has to work to keep his measured tone, his own fight instinct intensified by his proximity to Westcott, “there’s a big part of me that doesn’t want to give it to you. I’d much rather let someone else hang your guts like clothesline across Fifth Avenue than let you get off this easy, but as my girlfriend also reminds me, this isn’t about me. A gruesome death for you might be satisfying for me, but in the long run it means more attention. More eyes on Peter. And that’s not something he needs right now. He deserves a shot at a normal life. So here it is: I’m giving you a chance—just one—to turn yourself in. Confess to everything, take the sentence you deserve, and spend the rest of your life cowering behind bars. Of course, I hear inmates aren’t too fond of the ones who mess with kids either—but I doubt any one of them can tear you in half with their bare hands. At least in there you’ll have a shot.”

Tony knows what Westcott will do. He has covered his bases, looked at all of the angles, and there is only one that ends with Westcott escaping intact. But he still waits, watching Westcott’s face intently until the man reaches this conclusion for himself. When he does, it is like a sudden night has settled behind his eyes: they go so dark they almost look black.

Tony nods, takes a step back, and reaches for his phone, which he left on the kitchen island.

“He was different, you know.”

Tony lowers his hand. He turns back. Westcott is still pressed against the fridge, panting and sweating, but there is a manic gleam in his eyes now. The malicious grin is creeping back. He looks exactly as inhuman as he is.

“What did you say?”

“I said,” says Westcott, raising his voice, “Peter *was* different. All the other boys—they would have done anything to get what I was offering. And I mean *anything*. They were so hungry for a way out that all I had to do was fucking *ask*. But Peter... oh, I could see it in him the moment he walked through that door, mumbling his thanks, acting like he didn’t know what effect he had. Acting so goddamn *innocent*. I knew right away he was going to be different. More challenging. And ultimately that much more rewarding. And he *was* rewarding, Stark. Do you want to hear about it? Do you want to hear about how your precious little boy would look at me and beg —*guhhehheh*—!”

Westcott makes a horrible strangled noise as Tony’s fist connects with his adam’s apple. His hands leap to his neck, eyes bulging, and he crumples into a heap against the refrigerator, where he stays, gasping like a fish as he desperately tries to draw a breath of air.

“What was that?”

Hill’s voice crackles slightly as she unmutes her side of the comm, which has been silent this entire time. Tony, panting, opens his end.

“Sorry,” he says, “I punched him in the throat.”

“Tony. We had an agreement.”

“Yeah, yeah. I slipped.”

Hill sighs. “Is he injured?”

Westcott is still making terrible choking sounds. He’s not getting back up.

“FRIDAY?” says Tony.

“You fractured his hyoid, boss. He’s gonna need medical attention.”

“He gonna live?”

“Yes.” A pause. “He’ll be eating through a tube for a while, though.”

“Funny enough, I don’t have a problem with that.”

“Might make confessing a little hard if he can’t talk,” says Hill. “You couldn’t have gone for the eyes?”

“I can now, if you want.”

“Stark, we need an affirmative before we can move in.”

“Roger. Sorry.”

Tony kicks Westcott in the ribs. Hard enough to bruise, but not to break anything. Westcott rolls onto his stomach and Tony kneels down, puts a knee in the center of his back, and twists Westcott’s arm behind his back.

“Skip,” he says, when Westcott makes a strangled noise of pain, “I’m gonna need you to shut up for a second, buddy.”

Westcott does his best to silence himself around the fact that, between his throat and Tony’s knee, he can barely breathe. Tony leans down close, to speak directly in his ear.

“Looks like you’re gonna make a written statement tonight, Skip. But just so we’re on the same page, can you confirm for me? Are you gonna confess?”

Westcott’s upper lip starts to curl. Tony yanks on his arm and he barely bites back a scream.

“Let’s try that again. *Are you going to confess?*”

Westcott hesitates—then nods.

“And just to be clear—you and I never talked. Never even saw each other. Is that right?”

Another nod.

“Good. Excellent. In that case.”

Tony starts to ease up. Then, on second thought, he breaks Westcott’s arm anyway.

Tony presses Westcott’s face into the floor to muffle his scream, but it doesn’t last long anyway—just tapers off into a wheezy whimper as Tony finally lets go of his arm and gets to his feet.

“He’s right-handed, right FRI?”

“That’s affirmative, boss.”

“Great. Hill, he’s all yours.”

The door to the apartment bursts open, and Hill enters, followed by her detective friend and two other police officers, all of whom have their weapons drawn. Tony stands aside as they stream into the kitchen and haul Westcott off the floor, ignoring his feeble shout as they do.

"He's gonna have to go to the hospital," says Hill. "What should we tell them?"

"Tell them he fell. Tell them he's clumsy."

Hill nods, regarding Westcott impassively as the detective begins his Miranda rights.

"Steven Westcott," says the detective, ignoring another shout when he presses Westcott's face against the fridge and pulls out his handcuffs, "you are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say..."

Things sort of fade out from there. Tony is aware, sort of laterally, of the officers dragging Westcott out of the apartment. He's aware, too, of Hill, giving him a solemn nod as she follows them out. He's pretty sure he returns it, but it's difficult to say. The moment the door shuts behind them, the air in the apartment seems to compress, along with the space, until Tony feels as though he is sitting at the bottom of a deep trench, still and silent while the pressure builds around and above.

He closes his eyes. He takes a deep breath.

When he opens them, the world is back to normal.

He did it.

Tony knows he should call Pepper. He knows he should go home, try to get into the penthouse before the news catches wind of Westcott's final arrest. But he needs a minute. So he stands, braced against the kitchen island, and counts his own breaths until his breathing feels normal again, repeating it over and over: *Westcott is gone. Westcott is gone. Westcott is gone.*

When he is finally able to stand on his own again, Tony turns toward the hallway.

There are three bedrooms down there. One for the girls. One for Westcott. And one where Peter spent the longest, loneliest months of his life.

They all belong to Tony now. For him to do with whatever he will.

He takes a step toward them, hand outstretched.

Just as he is about to head down the hall, however, there is a knock at the door. Relieved but not quite willing to admit it to himself, Tony turns away from the bedrooms and heads back to the threshold, where he opens the door, expecting to find Hill or maybe one of the police officers, back for something they forgot.

Instead there is a crackle of electricity as an arm lunges out of the hallway, holding a taser and aimed directly at Tony's chest.

All the Good Ones

Tony has the wrist gauntlet activated before he can think. He sidesteps the taser and grabs it prongs-first, allowing the glove to absorb the shock and then crushing it as he drags it out of the offending hand. In doing so he also drags the person attached to that hand into the apartment: she stumbles as the weapon leaves her grasp, then turns on Tony with a snarl on her very tired, very puffy face.

It's Margaret Esposito.

As soon as she sees who she just tried to assault, Margaret's face goes from wrathful to stunned: the color goes from her cheeks like they've been doused in bleach. Tony wouldn't be surprised if his face has just done the same: of all the people he would expect to attack him—this week, anyway—Margaret is bottom of the list.

So, he says, "What the *fuck*?"

Margaret says, "What are you doing here?"

"I take it I'm not who you expected?" Tony drops the ruined taser, retracts his gauntlet. "So I say again, *what the fuck*?"

Margaret looks terrible. Her hair, still piled on her head in a ratty bun, looks like it hasn't been washed in days. She's wearing leggings and an over-large t-shirt that's covered in old stains—the kind of outfit one might wear if they were painting a house... or undertaking some other project they expected to make a mess. On her back is a bulging backpack.

The pieces fall into place. Tony says, "Oh, shit."

"Where's Westcott?" says Margaret. The shock hasn't worn out of her expression, but she still manages some hardness in her voice. "Is he here?"

"He's in the back of a police car, on his way to get booked into his new permanent address on Rikers Island," says Tony, shutting the door behind her. "His good fortune apparently, since the crazy train just arrived at his front door. What were you gonna do with that taser?"

Margaret blinks. "He's going to jail?"

"Prison, actually. Well, eventually. Westcott just confessed."

Margaret sways. Too late, Tony realizes that her pallor was probably not just from the shock of seeing him. Her knees give out, and Tony only just manages to catch her before they hit the tile.

"Woah! Woah, woah, woah. You're okay, just—hold on."

He hoists her back to her feet, dragging her toward the living room, but her legs fail again before he can make it around to the right side of the couch. They go down together, Tony lowering her as gently as he can to lean against the back of the couch and then crouching beside her, trying to get a good look into her glassy eyes.

"I'm fine," she croaks, "I'm fine, I'm just—you just surprised me. I'm okay."

"Do I need to call an ambulance?"

“No.” Margaret swallows and meets his eye. “I said I’m okay, just give me a minute.”

Tony, who recently made the mistake of not taking someone who said they were “okay” to the hospital in a timely manner, is tempted to disregard this, but something in the set of her jaw stops him from reaching for his phone. Instead he heads into the kitchen, pours her a glass of water from the tap and hands it to her as he sits beside her on the floor.

“You look dead on your feet, Marge,” he says. “Dead on your ass, actually. Drink that, or Westcott won’t be the only one getting a Stark-sponsored ride in a light-up van tonight.”

Margaret takes the water. Takes a sip, then presses a shaking hand to her forehead and says, “God *dammit*.”

“Not how you were expecting the night to go, I take it?”

“I’m such an idiot.”

“Normally I’d negate that, but seeing as you just showed up on the doorstep of a known child molester with a taser and a bag full of what I can only assume are your murder tools, I’m tempted to agree. Or maybe idiot isn’t the right word. Have you tried ‘insane’ on for size?”

Margaret takes another sip and doesn’t reply, no longer making eye contact.

“Margaret,” he says, serious now that he’s certain she’s not going to keel over, “please tell me you aren’t *actually* here to murder Skip Westcott.”

“What if I was?”

“Then I would be genuinely concerned for your sanity, considering the man has about a hundred pounds on you. And... I would be pretty damn grateful.”

Margaret lowers her cup and looks up at him, some of her defiance slipping into bewilderment.

Tony sighs.

“I owe you an apology,” he says.

The bewilderment deepens. Whatever Margaret was expecting, it wasn’t that.

“I lost my temper on you at the hospital,” he says. “I had promised myself—just the night before, in fact—I wasn’t going to make stupid, prejudiced decisions about people based on incomplete information, and I went and did it to you just because you were the first person in my path on what was, in my defense, a very bad day. I know you didn’t have anything to do with putting Peter in this place. You were the only person who tried to tell me I was wrong for thinking... whatever I thought about him when I read that file, and because I didn’t listen to you he was...” Tony sighs. “I know you came to the courthouse the other day. I know you care about Peter. Obviously. I’m sorry I lost it on you at the hospital.”

Slowly, Margaret shakes her head.

“I deserved every word,” she says.

And suddenly, she dissolves into tears.

“I’m sorry,” she gasps, wiping them furiously, “God, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I just haven’t been sleeping and I—oh, shit, I’ve got no right to be crying. I’ve got no right.”

Tony might not be the best when it comes to comfort. He might still be especially bad with it when it comes to Peter, but with Margaret he does have one option open to him. He wraps an arm around her shoulder, and he pulls her into a hug.

Startled, Margaret looks up, her shoulders twitching like she means to pull away.

“Roll with it,” says Tony, “I’m bad at this part too.”

And, surprisingly, Margaret does just that. She leans into Tony’s shoulder and lets him wrap his other arm around her while she continues to cry. Not loudly. In fact, she doesn’t make any noise at all, or even move: if Tony weren’t watching the tears roll down her cheeks he wouldn’t know she was crying at all. But she does, for what feels like at least ten minutes, until the flow finally slows and then halts, at which point she slowly, gently disentangles herself from Tony’s grasp and sits up.

“That was awkward,” she says.

“Agreed,” says Tony. “Feel better?”

Margaret nods.

“I’m sorry,” she says again. “It really wasn’t because of you. What you said at the hospital—I wasn’t upset. I was relieved.”

Tony raises an eyebrow, surprised. Margaret shrugs. She looks exhausted.

“Someone was finally taking care of him.”

Tony considers her for a drawn-out moment.

“I really wish you’d had Peter’s case a year and a half ago,” he says.

Margaret starts to laugh—it’s bordering hysterical—until she chokes it off quickly.

“It wouldn’t have mattered. I’m just a child advocate. I’m not even a real social worker.”

“Probably wouldn’t be either of those things if you’d gotten here thirty minutes sooner.” He nods to the backpack. “Most employers aren’t keen on first degree murder.”

Margaret sighs and struggles out of the backpack.

“I wasn’t going to kill him,” she says, handing it to him.

Despite this reassurance, when Tony opens the bag he finds exactly what he expected: there is a cluster of nitrile gloves, what appears to be a drop cloth, a syringe, disinfectant, and a bundle of knives, scalpels, and scissors held together with a rubber band.

“Are we working on different definitions of ‘kill’ here, Margaret?”

Now Margaret looks sheepish.

“I wasn’t going to kill him,” she says again. “I was going to—I was going to cut his balls off.”

There is a beat of silence, wherein Tony gapes, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, at Margaret, who stares back with almost as much disbelief, as if she has only just realized what she said, and what she came here to do.

Then they both burst out laughing.

It catches both of them off guard, but neither stop for a long time. They just laugh and laugh, shoulder to shoulder, each holding the other up. It's one of those rare, necessary fits that isn't really about laughing at the moment so much as it is about surviving it: for a few minutes, they both need laughter as much as they need air.

When the hysterics finally recede, Margaret has tears on her face again and Tony's chest is aching. They lean on each other until her giggles turn into hiccups and his chuckles turn into short, measured breaths, and then they sit up straight again, and she pulls the backpack toward her zips it shut.

She wipes her face.

"I really wouldn't have killed him," she says. "I... I used to be a nurse."

Tony coughs, wipes his mouth.

"And you gave that up for the glamorous world of child advocacy?"

Margaret gives a spasming shrug.

"Well," says Tony, "maybe you wouldn't have killed him, but I'm glad I got here first. The glamorous world of child advocacy could use more people like you, Margaret Esposito. It might be a step up from murder, but I have a feeling they'd still frown on vigilante castrations the next time performance reviews roll around."

Margaret shakes her head. "It doesn't matter," she mumbles. "I'm finished anyway. I'm turning in my resignation."

"You shouldn't."

"Mr. Stark—"

"Tony."

Margaret's expression softens. "Tony. You said it yourself: what good is Child Protective Services if we can't even protect children?"

"There are other children out there. Peter isn't the only one."

Margaret tilts her head back, blinks furiously a few times, and pulls her hair out of its bun so she can rub her scalp. Her roots are coming in. Tony is surprised to see she's a natural redhead.

"No," she says, "I'm finished. No more fucking things up... especially for Peter." She rolls her head along the back of the couch to look at Tony. "Are you gonna adopt him?"

Tony hesitates, because he and Pepper haven't brought it up with the kid yet, and he's reluctant to confirm anything until the paperwork is filed, too nervous of speaking a taboo to say it out loud. But after a second he nods. At the very least, Margaret has earned the truth.

"Good," she says. "You take care of him, Mr.—Tony. Or I'll hunt you down myself."

She rattles the backpack for good measure.

Tony doesn't need the threat to concede: he knew the moment he signed the guardianship papers

that night in the hospital there was no going back. Hell, he probably knew it the moment he pulled the mask off at the top of that old warehouse. Peter's his kid now—no way around it. Tony wouldn't take it even if there was.

"You've got my word, Margaret. Peter isn't going anywhere."

She pauses just long enough Tony can see the tears return to her eyes yet again, but before he can say anything about them Margaret gets to her feet, using the couch to steady herself, swings the backpack over her shoulder, and turns toward the door.

Tony stands too.

"You wanna see him?"

Margaret turns back.

"What?"

"See him. Peter. You still want to?"

Margaret looks like she is desperately trying to rein herself in, her face flashing through a dozen expressions in the space of a second.

"I don't—I don't want to cause any trouble, I—"

"You came in here ready to pull an *Italian Job* on the Westcott family jewels for a kid you've never met in real life. That makes you solid in my book. And though I'll thank you not to get too graphic about that part when you meet him, it might do the kid some good to know he's got more than me and Pepper pulling for him right now. Besides, I wouldn't mind having a professional sign off on his living conditions. You can let the judge know we don't have him squatting in a garbage heap when we apply for the adoption. So what do you say? You in?"

Margaret hesitates another second, her face still working silently. Then, at last, she appears to get whatever emotion she's battling under control.

She nods.

"Then come on," says Tony, "the getaway car awaits."

Margaret has him stop by her apartment on the way back to the Upper East Side so she can change out of her slaughter shirt. Tony is unsurprised to find she lives in Queens: he's starting to believe all the good ones are from around here. He *is* a little surprised she doesn't invite him up, though he supposes if her living space is anything like her personal appearance, it probably hasn't gotten much upkeep in the last few weeks. He doesn't object, therefore; just sets the car to idle and loiters on the curb until she appears half an hour later, freshly showered and wearing a much simpler, much hipper outfit than he has seen her in thus far: in combination with the fact she has let her hair down for the first time, the outfit makes her look ten years younger.

"Is it inappropriate if I tell you you're actually kind of a hottie?" says Tony as she climbs into the front seat. "You know, when I'm not staring you down through a tunnel of my own irrational

rage.”

“Very much so,” says Margaret, and then she doesn’t say anything else for the rest of the drive—just stares out the windshield while she twists her hands in her lap, clearly lost in thought.

By the time they arrive at his building, Tony is beginning to feel the first hints of concern: is it normal for a child advocate to be so nervous about meeting a child? Margaret could give Vision a run for his money in terms of expressionlessness as they board the private elevator, though hers is not a serene inscrutability: for all that her face does not show, Tony can practically feel her vibrating with anticipation even as he stands two feet away.

It’s too late to turn back now, though: they reach the top floor and the lift doors open onto the living room, where Pepper is sitting on the couch, frowning at her tablet.

She looks up as Tony and Margaret step inside.

“Tony,” she says, getting to her feet, “Westcott is all over the news. I’m sure Peter’s already seen it, but I think we should—oh.” She stops short, blinking in surprise when she spots Margaret. “I’m sorry—”

Pepper extends a hand toward their visitor, who is staring around the penthouse, and remembers to take it only at the last moment.

“Margaret,” she says. “I’m—”

“Peter’s social worker,” says Tony, and then, when Pepper’s face goes dark, hastens to add, “The good one. The one I told you about, remember?”

The shadow lifts. Pepper squeezes Margaret’s hand once before letting it go.

“I’m sorry,” says Pepper. “You caught me off-guard, I didn’t think we were going to have visitors. It’s nice to meet you, Margaret. Can I get you anything? Some tea?”

“She’s here to see Peter, Pep.”

Pepper gives him a fleeting look that somehow conveys an entire conversation at once. She’s still the only person he knows who can do it; he still, after fifteen years, quails under it.

Luckily, all those years have given him time to perfect his many looks of apology. He puts on one that he hopes says, *I know this is unexpected and I fully expect to pay for not warning you at a later date but for now please play it cool*, and thankfully, Pepper seems to understand.

“I’ll go get him from his room, shall I?”

Pepper pastes on a smile for Margaret, throws a glare at Tony, and heads off down the hall.

Margaret stares after them, unmoving. Tony waits a second, hoping she will snap out of it on her own, but apparently no snapping is forthcoming. So he gestures to the living room.

“Do you want to sit or...?”

Margaret shakes her head.

“Okay, zombie version of Margaret, but can I suggest you flip the switch back into human mode before the kid gets here, because—”

Too late. Pepper reappears from around the corner, and this time she has Peter in tow. Tony can tell Pepper has told him who's come to visit by the way he stares at his feet as he shuffles toward them, trying to hide his expression of mistrust until the last moment. Tony is just starting to realize that this was a mistake—that he should have asked the kid if he was okay with it before he dragged him out to meet with someone who, though personally just fine in Tony's estimation, is still a part of the system that repeatedly and drastically failed Peter—when the kid looks up.

Peter goes white. Peter goes so white, in fact, that Tony steps forward on instinct, arms extended as if to catch him. It's actually frightening how fast the color drains from Peter's face—Tony is certain the kid is about to pass out.

But Peter doesn't pass out. He makes a choking noise in the back of his throat and stares at Margaret Esposito with wide, shining eyes for a fraction of a second, then says,

“May?”

A Series of Late-Night Phone Calls

Part IV: May's Story

Pepper and Tony step forward at the same moment, forming a two-tiered blockade between Peter and Margaret. Pepper puts an arm out protectively, as though she expects Margaret might lunge, while Tony rounds on her.

"You know each other?" he demands. Turns to Peter. "Peter, do you know her?"

Peter doesn't answer. He is still staring at Margaret, who stares back, her eyes full of tears.

"Hi Peter," she says.

"What are you doing here?" Peter rasps.

"I'm—"

"Wait. Wait, just—stop right there." Tony addresses Margaret again. "You told me you'd never met him."

Margaret shakes her head. "I said I'd never gotten a chance to visit with him after I got his file," she says. There is an edge of desperation in her voice, of apology. "Tony, I'm so sorry, I should have said something before—but I was afraid if you knew who I was you wouldn't let me—and I had to—"

"Peter," says Pepper firmly, "I think you'd better go to your room, sweetheart."

Peter doesn't move.

"I called you," he says. "At the station, I called you. You never came."

The tears in Margaret's eyes spill over.

"I know," she says. "I know. Peter, honey, I'm so, so sorry, I got held up and I couldn't get there in time, but I—"

"I called you again," Peter says. "At the—later. They said you didn't have the same number anymore."

Tony didn't think it was possible for Margaret to look more miserable, but at this she does.

"I didn't know that," she says. "Something happened and I had to change it, but sweetheart, it wasn't because of you, I—"

Margaret steps forward. This is a mistake: Peter comes unrooted, takes a staggering step backward; at the same moment, Tony starts forward, ready to push her away. Lucky for her, Margaret flinches back before he has to.

"Sorry," she breathes.

"Will someone *please* tell me what the hell is going on before I go completely berzerk?" Tony

says.

“Tony—” Pepper begins.

“I’m his aunt,” says Margaret. “I’m—I *was* his aunt. My name isn’t Margaret Esposito. It’s May Parker.”

There is a moment of silence while this settles in.

Tony breaks it first.

“Peter doesn’t have an aunt.” He looks at Peter. “You don’t have an aunt. They—CPS would have said something. *You* would have said something. Pete?”

Peter swallows convulsively a few times. “I—”

“We got divorced,” Margaret interjects. “Ben and I. Before Peter’s parents died. I—we’re not... technically related.”

Her lower lip is trembling. She hasn’t taken her eyes off of Peter. He hasn’t taken his eyes off her.

“What...” Tony’s head is reeling. He looks at Pepper and she, for once, looks just as discombobulated as he feels. “Peter, what do you mean you called her?”

Once again, Margaret— *May* —answers first. “The night Ben died,” she says. “He called me from the police station.”

Now, amidst the confusion, a surge of anger.

“And you left him there?”

Finally, May tears her eyes off Peter, addresses Tony directly. “I’m sorry,” she says again. “I’m sorry, I’m not here to cause more trouble—”

“Really? Because you’re doing a pretty bad job of it so far.”

May turns to Peter, her face a picture of desperation.

“I don’t need anything,” she says. “That’s not why I’m here. Maybe I shouldn’t have come, I just— Peter, I needed you to know why I didn’t show up that night. I needed you to know it wasn’t anything you did.”

“I think that’s enough.” Pepper is still trying to coax Peter back toward his room without touching him, but besides that first step backward, Peter has not moved. He’s still looking at May like she is a mirage, like he expects her to turn to vapor at any moment. “Ms. Esposito or Parker or whatever your name is, I think you need to go.”

“I’m seconding that. FRIDAY—”

“Wait.”

Everyone looks at Peter. He swallows convulsively a few times, and Tony is sure he won’t be able to muster any other words: that one alone seems like it cost him all the strength he had available. But after a second, Peter speaks again.

“I want—I want to hear what she has to say.”

May sags.

“Peter,” says Tony, “you don’t owe her anything.”

At last, Peter tears his eyes away from May. He looks at Tony.

“I know I don’t,” he says. “But I still want to hear it. I want to know. Please, Tony. I want to know.”

It takes a moment to settle. Once everyone is calm enough, Tony leads them into the kitchen, where Pepper makes a strong pot of coffee and places a cup in front of each of the adults, though she hands May hers with an expression of ill-concealed distrust. She gives Peter a glass of orange juice, but he doesn’t touch it as she and Tony settle in on either side of him, facing May. He is still watching his one-time aunt with a concentration that suggests he thinks she’s going to disappear if he takes his eyes off her. May gazes back, wearing a quivery smile that looks like a real effort: alone on the other side of the table, she looks very small. She wraps her hands around the mug, but doesn’t drink.

When none of them say anything, she takes it upon herself to begin.

“It’s a long story,” she says softly.

“Call me crazy, but I’m not sure I want to turn this into a lengthy fireside chat,” says Tony. “Can we just skip to the part where you somehow come up with a great fucking excuse for abandoning a thirteen-year-old at a police station? Cuz if that’s not how the story ends, I’m not sure I want to hear it.”

“Tony,” says Pepper warningly, but May shakes her head.

“It’s okay. I’m not here to make excuses. I messed up. I messed up worse than I thought it was possible to mess up and I... I will probably never forgive myself for it. I shouldn’t. I’m really not here for your forgiveness. If you never want to see me again after this I’ll understand. I’ll disappear. I wasn’t even going to come until you—Tony—invited me, but I thought... God, Peter, I can’t imagine what you must have thought that first night. What you must have thought this past year and a half, and I just didn’t want you to ever, ever think I didn’t come because of you. It was never because of you.”

“So tell me,” Peter says.

May glances at Tony.

“It’s... it’s a long story, honey. I’m not sure I can explain well enough unless I tell the whole thing.”

“That’s—”

“Tell,” says Pepper, cutting across Tony. “Peter wants the truth. He deserves that. So you tell us—you tell him—and he can decide when it’s over if you explained well enough.” She turns to Tony. “He deserves this, Tony. Let her talk.”

Tony is still doubtful, but Pepper is, as usual, correct. So he scoots his chair just a little closer to Peter's, crosses his arms over his chest, and leans back, raising an eyebrow to invite May to go on.

May takes a deep breath, and begins.

Queens, 2010

Seven Years Earlier

It begins, like so many terrible things do, with a late-night phone call.

May keeps her phone on the bedside table, and usually she silences it before she goes to sleep, but tonight she must have forgotten. The jaunty ringtone has her sitting up before she's fully awake, reaching for it on impulse: Ben had a late shift tonight, and she doesn't want to wake him. She's about to silence it when she catches a glimpse of the caller's name.

She answers it instead.

"Maggie?" May whispers, tiptoeing into the living room. Ben rolls over as she shuts the door, but doesn't wake. "Hello?"

"Oh, hi honey." On the other end, May's sister is whispering as well, but she still sounds surprised. "I thought I would get your messages. I didn't think you'd be up. I'm sorry."

"It's fine." May makes it to the living room and curls up on the couch in the dark. "Why are you up so late, Mags? Is Mom okay?"

There is a pause.

"I don't want you to overreact, hon. I really did mean to catch your voicemail."

May's heart starts to pound. Maggie downplays everything; she always has. If she is calling in the night, she is probably trying to soften the blow of whatever bad news she's called to impart. Which can only mean—

"Is she dead?"

"No. No, May, God no. Sorry, I'm sorry. I worried you, I shouldn't—"

The brief adrenaline rush wears off. In its wake, May can't tell if she's relieved or disappointed. Then she hates herself for the thought.

"If she isn't—"

"Honey, I'm in the hospital."

"Oh, Jesus." May is on her feet at once, heading back toward the bedroom, already making a list of things to pack in her head. "Another fall? I keep telling you, Mags, if she did her exercises like the doctor told her, she'd stop keeling over every time she goes to the bathroom. How bad is it this time?"

"It's not Mom, honey. It's me."

May freezes, hand extended toward the door handle.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm—look, I'm just fine. I don't need you to come rushing out here."

"You're not making me feel better."

Maggie sighs.

"Oh, hon. I didn't want to do this over the phone."

The adrenaline returns.

"You're really scaring me, Mags."

Another sigh. This one quavers.

"May, I have cancer."

May slides to the floor, her back against the wall.

"What kind?"

"Breast. Or—it *was* just my breast. I had a—an incident tonight. And it's fine, I'm fine now, but they ran some tests and I guess it's in a few other places now. My lungs. And my spine."

May closes her eyes.

"How long have you known?"

"A few months. I'm sorry, May."

"Why didn't you *say* anything?"

"Because I know how you are, and I knew you'd come rushing out here for nothing. Plenty of women have breast cancer, and they do their treatment and then they're fine, and that's what the doctors said, that I'd be just fine. But now they're saying something different."

For a moment, May can't say anything. Her throat is too tight. She doesn't trust the prickling pain behind her eyes.

"May?" says Maggie softly.

"I'll be there in the morning."

"You don't have to—"

"Maggie. Don't say it. If you say I don't have to come I'll lose my mind."

A brief silence.

"I love you, honey. You know that, right?"

May does.

After she hangs up, May creeps into the bedroom, opens the closet, and begins pulling things out without turning the lights on, trying to be silent. She must fail at this in some respect, because a moment later Ben is sitting up, making quiet, sleepy sounds and switching on the light. When May does not turn around he calls her name, softly, and when she doesn't respond he comes up behind her, puts his hands on her shoulders. When that, too, is not enough, he presses his lips to her hair, and it isn't until they are both on the floor and Ben's arms are around her, his voice in her ear asking over and over, *What is it, what's wrong* that May realizes she is sobbing.

"You really didn't have to come," says Maggie for what feels like the thousandth time, sitting in the waiting room outside the oncologist's office. "Both of you. Ben, I feel so silly, you missing work for this."

"Maggie, we've talked about this. If you keep apologizing for us being here I'm going to rip all of my hair out and then you're really going to have something to apologize for, because you know how long it took me to grow it out."

Seated beside her in one of the hard plastic waiting room chairs, Ben puts a hand on May's knee.

"It's not an issue, Mags," he says. "I was due for a visit anyhow."

"You're a dear, Ben, but—"

Maggie is cut off when their mother, seated slightly apart from the rest of the group in her electric wheelchair, gives a derisive snort.

They all turn to look at her. Joy Reilly is blue-haired and has gotten so thin since the last time May saw her—more years ago than she wants to admit—that every time she looks at her she has an intrusive, unbidden image: of snapping her mother in half like a wishbone.

"I'm sorry," says Joy, when she is sure she has everyone's attention. "Are we showering praise for such small things, now? Is one visit all it takes to make up for stealing my youngest daughter for fifteen years?"

"For the love of God, Ma, can we just have one day—"

"It's okay, May," says Maggie, "she's just tired."

May wants to say that if that's the case their mother has been tired since nineteen seventy-eight. But she does not. Not for their mother's sake, but for Maggie's. If anyone here is tired it is her sister, who has been drooping lower and lower in her own chair the longer she has sat in it, gripping the handles on her chair to hide how much her hands are shaking. She is sallow-skinned and almost as thin as their mother, but her thinness does not make May want to snap her in half. Maggie's thinness makes May want to wrap her in her arms and hold her until her body does the work Maggie's is refusing to do: until her sister is healed.

May has been a nurse for twenty years, though. She knows that thinness. She knows, too, that it will not be healed by a hug, no matter how fierce.

"Margaret Esposito?"

They all look up. There is a nurse in the doorway, beckoning them forth. Maggie shoos Ben and May's hands away when they reach out to help her, and gets to her feet.

"That's me."

Maggie asks the doctor not to tell her how much time she has left. "Let me enjoy what I can," is what she says. But May knows her sister. She knows how hard it is for her to confront anything head-on, how much she hates conflict. She doesn't want to know because she can't stand to know, and May cannot stand to take that from her.

But while Ben helps Maggie and Joy to their car, May hangs back.

"Give me a timeline," she says.

The doctor obliges.

"I'll come home on weekends," says May. "And I'll get my brothers to help as much as possible. Between the three of us it might not be so bad."

They are lying on the full-size bed in Joy's attic, crammed shoulder-to-shoulder and sweating in the late-June heat. There is a guest room downstairs, but they opted not to take it: the attic is the only place in the house Joy can't barge in on them.

Despite the temperature, Ben has one arm around May's shoulders.

"You know your brothers aren't going to help," says Ben. "If that was an option Maggie wouldn't have wasted the last ten years waiting on your mom hand and foot."

"It wasn't a waste. Don't say that."

"She should be in a home, May. Especially now. That shouldn't be how Maggie spends her last months."

May swallows the lump that has risen in her throat. It wasn't there when the doctor told her. It's different when Ben says it.

"Who's going to pay for that, Ben? Us?"

"Your brothers could."

"They've got families."

"You've got a family."

"They have *kids*."

Ben falls silent for a moment. He kisses her shoulder. “You’re not regretting it, are you?”

“Regretting what?”

“Us. Just being us. Not having kids.”

May rolls away from him, but only so she can press her back to his chest. Ben wraps around her, runs a hand through her hair, buries his mouth in the crook of her neck. Neither of them care about the warmth.

“I don’t regret anything,” May says, and she is telling the truth. “But I have to do this now.”

Against her neck, Ben nods.

“It’s just a few months,” May says.

Ben nods again.

At first things are alright.

The week May moves her clothes down from the city, she moves in with her older sister—the woman who has, as long as May can remember, been more like a mother than her actual mother. The one who stuffed notes into May’s lunch when she was in elementary school, who held her the night she broke up with her first boyfriend. The one who dropped her off for her first day of nursing school and cheered louder than anyone the day she graduated. Who stood beside her, beaming, when she married Ben—the only member of May’s side of the family who showed up. The only one who encouraged May to get out when she could. To build a life of her own. Now is May’s chance to repay her: she takes Maggie to her appointments and keeps track of her meds and sits beside her when the new chemo kicks in and has her running for the bathroom every five minutes. When Maggie is finished throwing up they settle on the couch and watch reruns of M*A*S*H together and catch up on everything they have missed while May has been in the city and Maggie has been here, taking care of their mother. On the days when there is no chemo, no appointments, May goes back to the city, just like she said she would.

It works until it doesn’t.

By the end of the third week, their M*A*S*H marathons are over: Maggie can no longer sit up long enough to make it through even one episode without experiencing excruciating pain in her back, and she is too tired to try: she sleeps through most of the day and vomits through most of the night. By week four, it’s clear that the doctors’ timeline was optimistic: at that point, Maggie can barely speak for the pain, and when she does she is barely coherent. She only recognizes May some of the time. Sometimes she mistakes her for their mother. Sometimes for her husband, who has been dead for eighteen years.

It’s good May is a nurse. It means that when Maggie stops being Maggie, May knows what to expect. She knows how to make her into a patient.

Their mother is a different matter.

When she made the decision to move home, May thought she was ready. Joy has always been... as

she is—it's why May left in the first place—so there was no hope that things might somehow change in the wake of Maggie's diagnosis, and May told herself that if she accepted that, prepared for it, and held her ground, then it wouldn't be so bad.

It turns out, however, that the memory of mistreatment is not the same as experiencing it in the present.

"I see your husband has kept you well-fed, at least," Joy said the day May moved in. She was in her wheelchair on the porch, smoking a cigarette and watching Ben haul May's luggage with pale, narrowed eyes. "Think you'll be able to manage taking care of someone besides yourself for once?"

"Great to see you too, Ma," May said.

Deflection had been her weapon as a child, and May was determined to use it again. But as the weeks have worn on and Maggie has gotten weaker, deflection has felt less and less effective. It's more difficult, she discovers, to deflect her mother's critiques of her posture when she has her half-conscious sister propped on her shoulder, trying to guide her to the bathroom. Difficult to deflect when her mother's wrinkled nose and exclamation of disgust when they do not make it in time bring tears of shame to her sister's eyes. Difficult to deflect when, on top of taking care of her sister, May is taking care of her mother as well.

"Does the Parker boy know how to cook, or does he just starve at home?" Joy asks, when May burns the casserole one evening—a task she attempted solely for her mother, since Maggie can no longer tolerate solid foods.

"His name is Ben, Ma, and we've been married fifteen years. He's not a boy."

"You're a man when you take care of your family," Joyce says, opening her arms to indicate the empty kitchen. "Tell me, sweetheart, where is your man?"

Ben is, of course, back in New York. May quit her job at the hospital to come home; one of them has to maintain an income. But it doesn't seem to matter how many times May points this out: her mother is always ready with an underhanded comment about the size of that income (small) or the fact that he stole her youngest child (ridiculous—May's choice to leave was only ever her own) or that he hasn't made the effort to visit since May moved down here, even though she is the one dealing with a dying sister. (This last, at first, seems just as ridiculous as the other comments. Why should Ben subject himself to someone who has made it clear, as long as she has known him, that she despises him? But the more her mother says it—*Where is Ben?*—the deeper the question burrows in May's mind, until she finds herself asking it even without her mother's needling. *Where is Ben?*)

"I don't think I'm going to make it up this weekend," says May toward the end of August. "They moved Maggie's chemo to Friday, and I don't think she'll be up for staying at home alone over the weekend."

There is a short silence on the other end, and May immediately begins to feel annoyed. She is ironing her mother's church clothes; the steam is making sweat pop up all over her forehead.

"Ben? Can you hear me?"

"I heard. Sorry. May, it's Peter's birthday this weekend."

"I know." May does know. The idea of missing it has created a hard lump in the pit of her stomach that hasn't gone away for days. But there are no other appointment slots available at the treatment center. She doesn't have a choice. "I sent a present to Mary. She said she'd give it to him on the day."

Another pause.

"Ben?"

"Yeah. I'm... I know. He's just going to be disappointed. He's been asking if you'll be there."

May feels a paroxysm of regret, followed by a stab of annoyance. Doesn't he know she would be there if she could?

"I don't know what to tell you, Ben. I'm busy. I'm always busy."

"Are you alright?"

May heaves an exasperated sigh. Of course she isn't alright. And she hates having to communicate like this, over the phone. Ben has never been very expressive, either in his words or his tone, and May has always relied on his touches to know what he's really thinking. A hand on her shoulder, a kiss on her cheek—little reassurances to let her know that even though they are fighting, it's a moment, not a cataclysm. Now May is all jumbled, from the distance and her dying sister and her judging mother. She doesn't even know what she is feeling, let alone what he is.

"Can you come here?" she says.

"Then both of us would miss his birthday."

"No, not this weekend, I mean—next time. Next week. Can you come here, just once?"

May immediately regrets her snappishness, but she doesn't retract. Doesn't apologize.

Ben says, "Of course."

After May hangs up, there is an acrid smell—burnt polyester. In her anger, she has neglected the iron. Her mother's dress is ruined.

Ben's visit is torturous. It takes just one day for Joy's comments to go from underhanded to blatant. At dinner, she asks Ben if he thinks his parents are turning in their grave knowing that one of their sons turned out to be a childless handiman and Ben excuses himself from the table.

After May finishes helping Maggie eat, she finds him on the back porch, tapping his fingers on the railing. It's a nervous habit that only pops up when he wants a cigarette. He gave them up the day Peter was born.

"What was that?" he asks without turning around as May comes up behind him.

"That's how she always is, you know that. You just have to ignore it."

"I'm not talking about her, I'm talking about *you*. Why didn't you defend me?"

May realizes too late that he is right. She has always defended Ben, but tonight she didn't say anything—just kept scooping steamed squash into her sister's half-open mouth.

She doesn't have a response, so she says, "I don't think it's going to be much longer."

A muscle in Ben's cheek spasms.

"I miss you, May," he says.

"I'm right here."

Finally, Ben turns around. He looks at May, but does not touch.

"Are you?" he says

Once again, May doesn't know what to say.

Two weeks later May checks Maggie into the hospital. She's in too much pain to get out of bed, and there is blood in her urine. The scans show the tumor in her spine has spread. There are new growths in her kidneys.

"I love you, honey," Maggie says, after May has tucked her into her hospital bed, promising to return in the morning, once their mother is taken care of. It's the most coherent Maggie has been in weeks.

May gets the phone call that night, past midnight. Just like the first call, this one wakes her up. Unlike the first call, there is no Ben in bed beside her. There is no one to wake up. No one to take her in their arms when she slides to the floor.

This time, though, there are no tears. May is silent. May is alone.

Her brothers come to the house for the wake. It's the first time they've been over since the day May moved in. May takes the opportunity to corner them after the buffet is laid out, when everyone is distracted by the food.

"We need to talk about Mom," she says.

John, who is just a couple of years older than May, is at least apologetic. He really wishes he could help, he says, but all of his savings are tied up in his 401K and college funds for the kids. He couldn't touch them even if he tried. And taking her in is out of the question. John's wife hates Joy.

David, second oldest after Maggie, is blunter.

"I wouldn't spend a dime on that bitch if the Pope himself asked me to," he says. "And I'm sure as

hell not going to subject my kids to her, either.”

When they walk away, May sees Ben, standing near the hors d'oeuvres, wearing a black suit and a tie and watching her—quiet. Difficult to read. As is Ben’s way.

May knows what the beginning of the end feels like. It feels like this.

But it will take her a long time to admit it.

“You can’t do this. It’s everything you didn’t want for yourself. Dammit, May, you rebuilt your life from scratch to get away from that woman and now you’re going to tear everything down to take care of her? What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking she’s my mother. I’m thinking Maggie spent the last years of her life making sure she didn’t get slotted away in some awful facility. I’m thinking—what was that all for if I’m just going to do it anyway the moment Maggie’s gone?”

“That was Maggie’s choice. Maggie’s, not yours. And what do you think she would say about this? She wanted you to get out, May, you know she did.”

“You don’t know what she’d want, Ben. You weren’t even here when she died.”

“I’m here now. Look at me. I’m here now.”

“Will you stay?”

A long pause.

“Ben. Will you stay?”

“What about Richard and Mary? What about Peter?”

“You can visit on weekends. Or they can come here.”

“You really want to subject Peter to your mother?”

“He’s a tough kid. You never give him enough credit.”

Another pause. When Ben replies, his voice is quieter.

“My life is in New York, May.”

The hard lump is back in her throat. It’s the same one that was there when the doctor gave his prognosis for Maggie. This feels like a prognosis of a different sort.

“What about me?” May asks. “What about me?”

They try, for a while, to make things work—Ben in New York, May in Massachusetts. As when Maggie was alive, May makes the trip to see him whenever she can, and sometimes Ben reciprocates—though his visits become more and more infrequent as the months wear on. Far from gratitude at the return of her youngest child, Joy has doubled down in her resolve to remind Ben of how inadequate he is, how unwanted. May fights it, when she can. But mostly she is too tired.

Finally, Ben stops coming down altogether.

When May arrives on the doorstep of their apartment, one cold, blustery morning in February, Ben looks almost as tired as she feels. What he does not look is surprised—not even when May hands him the papers she has brought for him to sign.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“So am I,” says Ben, and then, tentatively, he draws her into his arms. The hug is light at first, then stronger as May’s shoulders start to shake with silent tears.

After a while, she realizes Ben is crying too.

They don’t talk much in the six months following the divorce. May takes a part-time job at the hospital in Gloucester. She makes a few friends, but most of her time is still spent taking care of her mother, who, far from being grateful for or relieved by the divorce, now comments on May’s spinsterhood on a near-hourly basis. What’s more, she seems to have made it her mission to fall out of her chair as often as possible, meaning that May spends many of her non-working hours at the hospital anyway, sitting in waiting room chairs and sipping awful coffee and thinking about how much she misses the sounds and sights and even the smells of the city. Thinking about Sundays spent at Coney Island with Peter, eating hot dogs and telling stupid jokes. Thinking about waking up late on the weekends, Ben in the bed beside her.

She thinks, too, about picking up the phone and calling Ben. But anything she could say would be a confirmation of everything he warned her against. She misses him—misses him so much that when she thinks of him it feels like she is breathing water instead of air—but she can’t say that either. If she admits any of it, Maggie’s sacrifice was for nothing. *Their* sacrifice was for nothing.

She doesn’t call.

In August, May receives a letter. It’s from Peter—a thank-you for his birthday present. Just like last year, May sent his present directly to Mary, with whom she is still friendly.

Dear Aunt May, it says, and May has to blink back tears at the “aunt,” *thank you for the Lego set. My dad says ten is too old for Legos but Ben says he’s just jealous because he’s old. My birthday was fun, but we missed you. Maybe I’ll see you at Christmas. Ben told me not to say anything if I wrote you a letter, but I can tell he misses you too. Love, Peter.*

Enclosed is a picture of Peter, grinning goofily behind lopsided glasses, holding up May's present for the camera. Ben is standing in the background, looking at Peter and smiling gently.

That night, May finally picks up the phone.

Ben doesn't answer.

She doesn't try again.

In October, May is awakened by what at first she mistakes for her alarm. She wakes up early for her shift at the hospital, so it's not strange that it's dark outside—not until she glances at the clock on her bedside table and sees that it is two am. Even stranger: it is Ben's name lighting up her screen.

May's stomach clenches. No good calls come at two am.

She answers her phone.

"Ben?"

On the other end, silence.

"Ben? Can you hear me?"

May is just about to hang up, heart sinking—he must have dialed her accidentally—when Ben finally replies.

"Hi," he says. "Hi. I'm sorry. It's late. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have called, I..."

May sits up, turns the light on. Her heart is hammering so hard she almost can't hear over the rush of blood in her ears. She has never heard Ben stammer like this. Ben is always quiet, calm and assured. Always selects his words carefully. Now, it sounds like he has forgotten how to breathe, much less speak. He keeps inhaling shallowly on the other end.

"Take a breath," says May. "Tell me what happened. Are you hurt?"

Ben follows the instruction, finally takes a substantial gulp of air. He lets it out slowly, and sounds more like himself when he says, "There was a car accident. Richard and Mary are dead."

There is a stabbing, wrenching pain in May's abdomen. When she swallows, she swallows bile.

"Peter?" she says.

"He's alive," says Ben, and her stomach untwists, just a little. "He's alive, but he's in the hospital. He broke some ribs, but they said he's going to be okay." Another shaky breath. "They left him to me, May. They left him to me and now I have to go in there and tell him his parents are dead and I don't know how... I don't know if I can. I don't know if I can do this."

Ben makes a small, plaintive sound, then another, and it takes May a second to realize that he is crying.

She gets out of bed. Stands straight, even though there is no one and nothing there to see her. Nothing except the darkness.

“Yes,” she says, “yes you can. You can do this. You’re a strong person and a good man. You’re going to be fine.”

“He needs his parents. I—”

“Love him,” May says firmly. “You love him. That’s all that matters, okay? The rest you can work out later.”

The tightness in her chest is swelling, turning into a terrible, gnawing pain. She should be there. She can’t be there.

She won’t let it show.

“I’m sorry.” Ben’s voice is still teary, but less so. “I’m sorry I called you. I didn’t know who else. I know things... between us...”

“It’s okay,” says May. “I want you to... I want us to be... I still care about you, Ben.”

“I still care about you too,” says Ben softly.

“I’m... Ben, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah,” says Ben. The tears are gone now. Disbelief is morphing into shock. “Yeah.”

She’s too far away to offer anything substantial. Still, she says, “Tell me what you need,” and does her best to give it when he does.

May plans the funeral. It’s not just because she knows how—though she does, thanks first to her father and then Ben’s parents and now to Maggie—but also because Ben is busy, suddenly, figuring out how to take care of an injured, grieving ten-year-old. So May calls the funeral home and picks out the plots and the caskets and the flowers, and does her best to inform Richard and Mary’s friends of what has happened. She does most of this over the phone from the living room of her mother’s house while her mother complains about neglect in the background, and even as everything comes together May still feels useless for not being able to go to the city. For not being closer to Ben and especially to Peter, for whom her grief is sharpest. Ten years old and without his parents—she almost can’t bear to think about it.

And yet, even though it is her event, May is still late for the funeral. Since her brothers were “unavailable” to watch their mother the night before, she plans to leave in the small hours of the morning the day of. But just as May is climbing into her car, Joy starts shrieking: Her left arm is numb; her chest hurts. May knows—she *knows* it is a ploy to get her to stay—but she still drives her mother to the ER, checks her in, and waits until the sedatives kick in before hurrying back out, apologizing to her fellow nurses for the shitstorm they are going to encounter when Joy wakes up and finds May is gone.

Four hours later, May arrives at the church. As she is jogging up the front lawn, she spots Ben walking down it, heading for the row of cars parked out front. He is dressed in an old black suit—

the same one he wore to his wedding—and he is carrying Peter, who is asleep with his head on Ben’s shoulder.

They meet in the middle.

“I’m sorry.” The tears May has been holding back since Ben called a week ago spill forth easily now that they are face-to-face. She struggles to keep her voice low, because Peter looks small and pale and exhausted even with his eyes shut. She can see the bandages poking out above the collar of his shirt. “I’m so sorry, I tried to get away earlier but I—”

“It’s okay,” Ben whispers. “It’s okay, don’t worry. The service is still going, you should go inside.”

May glances at the church, then back at Ben. “Are you leaving?”

Ben nods. “We probably shouldn’t have come. He’s still in a lot of pain, but he insisted. I’m surprised he made it as long as he did.”

“Let me help you get him home.”

Ben shakes his head. “You should stay,” he says. “All the work you did...”

But now that she is here, May can’t imagine going inside. She can’t imagine letting either of the faces in front of her out of her sight.

“No,” she says, “I’ll come with you.”

Ben doesn’t fight her any further. She follows them to the car and climbs into the backseat, helps Ben lay Peter across it with his head in her lap and then stays there while Ben drives them back to the apartment they once shared, but which is now only Ben’s. Ben’s and Peter’s.

Peter doesn’t wake on the drive, nor when Ben carries him upstairs and tucks him into the bottom bunk in what was once their guest room. May takes Peter’s glasses off, places them on the bedside table.

“He’s still so small,” she says.

Ben tilts his head at the doorway. “Come on.”

They head into the kitchen, where Ben makes coffee and hands May a cup. They sit across from each other, both pale and red-eyed and silent, and May slides a hand across the table and slips it into Ben’s.

“I still can’t believe it,” she says. “He’s so young...”

Ben nods. “They said it was a miracle Peter survived. The car went under the truck. I guess another few feet and...”

He squeezes May’s hand, trails off.

May swallows. “Are you... how is he doing?”

“About as well as possible, I guess. I don’t know that it’s sunk in yet.” Ben’s lip trembles. “God, I don’t know what I’m doing.” He laughs shakily. “I don’t suppose you have any parenting advice?”

May laughs too: equally small, equally shaky. “What did you tell your mom when we got married? *May will have kids—*”

“—when she’s dead,” Ben finishes. “Yeah, my mom loved that.”

They both laugh now, but it tapers quickly.

“Maybe I can”—May swallows hard— “on the weekends, or—my days off—”

Ben squeezes her hand harder, shakes his head.

“You’ve done so much,” he says. “And I really didn’t deserve any of it. But I think... I think Peter needs consistency, for a while. I think he needs to know what he can count on. I’m not saying it to criticize. I’m really not. But you have to take care of your mom, and I... I have to take care of him.”

May wants to protest. But she knows he’s right. She nods, swipes at the tears that fall when she does.

“I didn’t get it,” says Ben. “When Maggie died. I didn’t understand. I’m... so sorry for that, May.”

More tears. May wipes them again. She says, “I’m sorry too.”

Ben sits back. He makes a valiant attempt at a smile.

“Honestly, though,” says Ben. “Any advice?”

May takes a breath. It’s not her place, she knows it’s not. But Ben is looking askance at her, equal parts grief and desperation, and even though May feels just as lost as he looks, she can’t bring herself to say no.

“Trust yourself,” she says. “You’re a gentle person; that’s good. But gentle might not always be enough. I know that kid—he’s a blabbermouth, and you—”

“Aren’t?”

May smiles gently. “Not so much.” The smile fades. “Make sure you talk to him. Make sure he knows it’s okay to... to feel whatever he needs to feel. And then let him feel it. You can’t always fight the bad stuff. You just have to let it pass.”

“It’s okay not to be okay. Right?”

“Yeah,” says May. “It really is.”

Returning to her mother’s house after the funeral is harder than it has ever been. The only thing that makes it tolerable is the fact that her mother is giving May the silent treatment, apparently under the impression she is punishing May for leaving. The quiet provides a modicum of peace, but not enough: May finds, in the following weeks, that she is constantly alternating between a hot, itchy restlessness and grief so heavy she can barely move under the weight of it. Many nights she lies awake, alternating between staring at the ceiling and staring at the picture of Peter with his Lego set and wondering, *Did I make the right choice?*

Sometimes she is sure she didn’t. Sometimes she is so sure she gets up, goes to her closet, and starts sorting through her things, trying to pick only that which is most essential so she can make

her getaway in the night. Then she catches a whiff of Maggie's perfume—or spots a piece of her clothing, tucked between May's own—and she gets back into bed.

She doesn't hear from Ben for months and so May thinks, *That's it*. Their shared moment at his apartment was good and right and necessary—not just because he was able to apologize and she was able to offer her small help, but because they needed the chance to say goodbye. And that, she tells herself, is what it was. A goodbye.

Then, in February—almost exactly a year after May served the papers—Ben calls.

“Peter's getting bullied at school,” he says, after an awkward hello. “I don't really know what to do about it.”

May, taken aback by the suddenness of the call, the lack of preamble, says automatically, “Want me to come kick someone's ass?”

And suddenly, just like that, they are talking again.

At first they only talk about Peter. It occurs to May, briefly, that she could feel resentful of this: when their situations were reversed, after all, Ben wasn't exactly keen to engage on matters relating to her mother. But she doesn't feel resentful, and she knows that isn't really what this is. Ben talks about Peter because Peter is his life, and he *wants* to talk to May, even if he doesn't know how to say so outright. And May likes the updates. In fact, they quickly become the highlight of her week. Peter is just as smart and talented and precocious as he was when she was really his aunt, and Ben...

Ben is the same man she married: steadfast, even, calm. But with each passing month she can tell he's becoming more, too. More patient. Stronger, but softer too.

Parenthood suits him. It suits him in a way that is both wonderful and makes May a little sad she isn't there to experience it for herself. But, she tells herself, that is probably just proof that her absence is for the best. May never wanted kids, and even though she secretly delights in giving Ben advice—everything from how to deal with the bullies (which is more her purview than his anyway: May was always the fire in their relationship) to how to talk about grief (though they are both well-versed in this by now)—she knows what he said the day of the funeral still stands: May has responsibilities here. Ben and Peter need something she cannot give.

The weight of grief eases as time goes on, but the question never really goes away. It still rises out of the dark when she least expects it, a whisper carried on a whiff of Maggie's perfume, or a glimpse of Peter's face: *Did I make the right decision?*

Sometimes she is sure. Sometimes she isn't. She supposes, as the months turn into years, that she will never know for sure. And maybe it doesn't matter that she doesn't know: what matters is the decision was made.

The summer before Peter turns thirteen, Ben calls unexpectedly. It's only unexpected because they had their weekly phone call the day before—during which they both celebrated Peter's outstanding math scores—and Ben doesn't usually call twice in a row. May's heart starts to pound when she answers and is greeted by a breathless silence: it feels the same as the night he called to tell her that Richard and Mary were dead.

“Ben?” May’s own voice sounds thready with anticipation. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Yeah. Oh, sorry. I just... got distracted.”

“Is Peter—?”

“Yes. Yes, he’s fine. Sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you.”

May is silent, waiting for Ben to go on, certain the other shoe is about to drop.

“Um,” says Ben, “would you like to come visit?”

May almost drops the phone.

It turns out Peter has been asking about her. Ben doesn’t offer much explanation, but May discovers she doesn’t need one. As soon as the invitation is out there, May wants to go. She wants it more than she has wanted anything for a long time. Maybe since Maggie died.

She calls her brothers. Neither of them are available. May tries again and again and finally, as the date of her trip approaches, she texts them both and says, *I’m going to New York tomorrow. Come take care of mom or let her starve. I’m fine either way.*

John arrives on their doorstep the next day. Joy sobs and shouts at May as she drags her suitcase down the stairs. She continues all the way out the door, until May is in her car and pulling out of the driveway.

But then she is gone. And four hours later she is parking outside her old building, taking the elevator to her old apartment, where she is greeted by her ex-husband and his nephew, who immediately drags her into his bedroom to show her the transistor radio he has been building from scratch. Peter talks non-stop, giddy and enthusiastic, as easily as though May has been there the entire time. And Ben—Ben stands in the doorway and watches, and when May looks over her shoulder to meet his eye he smiles, small and quiet and pleased, and May knows him well enough to know what that smile says.

It says, *Welcome home.*

During the day they explore the city, go to Coney Island and Times Square. At night they watch old movies and order in (even though both of them have been caregivers for years now, neither Ben nor May has ever learned to cook), and any chance for awkwardness is quickly quashed by Peter, who is so full of stories about school and stupid jokes and fantasies about superheroes that silence doesn’t stand a chance.

When Peter falls asleep in the middle of *The Thing*, Ben takes May’s hand in his. She doesn’t stand a chance either. She holds on.

She visits once more that summer, for Peter's birthday—the first time in years she hasn't missed it. After the cake is gone and Peter's friend Ned has gone home, Peter offers to help May do the dishes while Ben takes the trash out. He's been bright-eyed and breathless all evening—Ned bought him a robotics kit, and together they've already built more than half—but as he takes up his station beside her at the sink, Peter falls uncharacteristically quiet.

"What's up, squirt?" May asks, nudging him with her elbow. "Didn't you have a good birthday?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was the best. Thanks, May."

May sets the dish she is working on in the soapy water, turns to face him more fully. Peter's brow is furrowed. The dish in his hand was dry long ago, but he's still swiping at it like he means to rub a hole in it. May puts a hand on his, gently halts him.

"Peter?"

Peter sighs. He sets the dish down. He says, without looking at her, "I miss my mom and dad. It's just worse, around now."

May squeezes Peter's hand, nods.

"You know that's okay, right?"

"Yeah, I know. Ben says that all the time. And I talk to him about it, but sometimes... I just don't want him to think he's not enough, you know?" Peter takes a breath. "I'm glad you came. He's happier when you're here. And um—so am I."

May drops Peter's hand. She puts her arm around his shoulder instead, squeezes him to her side, and pretends not to notice when he hastily wipes a stray tear.

"Hey," she says, "I like being here too. You don't have to feel sorry about it." May hesitates, then presses a quick kiss to Peter's hair. "Besides, where else am I gonna get the thrill of kicking a thirteen-year-old's ass at Mario Kart?"

Peter laughs, play-struggles out of her grip, and picks up the plate. "Whatever. I was going easy on you, old lady."

"And I was just warming up, punk."

They go back to scrubbing, silent for a moment.

"Peter?"

Peter looks up.

"You know you can call me, right?" May swallows, glances at the door, but Ben is not back yet. She's not sure if she is overstepping a boundary, but she's also not sure she wants to find out. "I know I'm not always around, but that doesn't mean I'm not... I just want you to know, if there's ever anything you need, I'm an option, okay?"

She can tell Peter is trying to look nonchalant, even though it's an effort. He shrugs one skinny shoulder and says, "Okay, yeah. Thanks, Aunt May."

Peter immediately goes red, lowers his head. But May doesn't correct him. In fact, she has to lower her own head, to hide the mixture of sadness and delight that she is sure has appeared on her face.

And then Ben is back, and the moment is over.

When Ben comes into the living room that night and pulls May off the couch, she follows him to the bedroom without saying a word. For once, she doesn't have to wonder if she is making the right choice.

For a few months it's easy. Not the logistics—not figuring out who will take care of her mother and fighting with her brothers and asking for time off at the hospital and the traffic—but the rest of it. Ben and Peter. When she's with them, it doesn't matter that the other stuff is hard. They make the rest of it worth it.

It's easy until it isn't.

"I'm thinking about Christmas," says Ben one morning in the fall. He is laying in bed, and May is packing her things; her trip is almost over. "I was thinking I could take Peter upstate, maybe to the Catskills. He's never been out of the city."

"That sounds good," says May. "You both deserve a vacation."

"I was thinking you could come too."

Though her back is turned to him, May's smile becomes fixed. She doesn't turn around.

"May?"

"Hm?"

"What do you think? Christmas in the Catskills? I've been wanting to cream that kid with a snowball ever since he started beating me on Sunday Sudoku, but I'll give you first dibs if it makes a difference."

Now May throws a smile over her shoulder. It's tight. Ben sits up.

"Did I say something?"

"No." May goes back to packing, throwing her clothes into her suitcase a little more carelessly than before. "Actually, yes. You know Christmas is hard. My brothers are both going to be out of town. I can't just leave my mother alone."

When Ben doesn't reply May gets to her feet and turns around. He is sitting on the edge of the bed

now, bare feet on the floor, staring at the carpet between them.

A phantom heat flares behind May's breastbone. It's been so long since she's felt it that it takes her a moment to recognize the anger she used to experience when she first moved home.

"What?" she says. "What is it? You know I can't just leave her, you *know* —"

"I don't, actually," says Ben. He looks up. "I don't know that. It's been years, May. Years. You were supposed to be there for six months. You gave up everything. You gave up *us*. Are you happy?"

May looks at her own feet automatically and then curses herself for it.

"You can't even say it," says Ben. "You know I ask Peter the same question all the time? He's thirteen years old and he knows how to answer me honestly. Why can't you?"

"That's so fucking unfair, Ben."

"Why?" Ben gets out of bed, crosses the room to stand in front of her. "What is so unfair about the fact that I want you here? I *know* you're happier when you're with us. I know it. So why can't you just be with us?"

"You know why I can't!" May bursts. "I've been explaining this to you over and over! Over and over. Yes, for years, because responsibility doesn't just go away the more time goes by. This isn't a choice for me Ben, and I don't know how many more ways I can say that before you start to hear me! She's my family, she's—"

"What about me?" Ben counters. "Aren't I your family?"

May has rarely seen him like this—so ready for confrontation. But she doesn't back down.

"You signed the papers, Ben."

"You served them."

"And *you signed them*. I begged you to come to Gloucester with me. What more was I supposed to do?"

For a moment, Ben is silent. Then he says, "What about Peter?"

May's retort catches in her throat. Her anger, so hot a moment ago, feels like it has been doused by a great, icy wave. Instead of biting back, she says. "Oh, shit. Shit. We did it again."

How is it May has made it through this many years of living and still has to keep learning the same lesson over and over? How could she have thought she would be allowed this one thing when everything in her life, for years, has taught her that the opposite is true? Responsibility is not a choice. That has not changed, and really neither has anything else, except that she and Ben somehow convinced themselves that it had.

She made her choice. Right or wrong, she made it. And Ben made his.

There are more words after that. More arguing, more tears. But they both know where it will end up. When it is over—when they are both sitting on the floor in a tangle, holding one another and exhausted and both so filled with regret it feels closer to mourning—neither one of them is surprised.

"I still love you," says Ben.

May loves him too.

But she still leaves.

It ends, like so many terrible things do, with a late-night phone call.

It's late, but May hasn't been asleep for long. She hasn't slept much these last few months: there have been many hours spent lying awake. Not staring at old photos, now. Not even staring at the ceiling. Just... being.

On this March night, May must have drifted off just a couple of hours before the call comes. She's not deeply asleep; she jerks awake on the first ring.

The number on the screen isn't saved in her phone. But it's a New York area code.

Right away, May knows. It's not only because she knows, better than anyone, what a phone call at this hour means. She can feel it in her chest. An absence. A lack.

She answers the phone.

"Hello?"

On the other end, silence.

May tries to take a breath and finds that she cannot.

"Hello?" she says again. "I don't know if you can hear me, but I can't hear you."

"It's me."

The voice on the other end is small. She almost can't hear it.

"Sorry, say again?"

"It's me." He raises his voice. "Peter."

May gets out of bed. She is shaking all over, but she heads for the closet automatically. "Peter? Honey, what's wrong? It's the middle of the night. Where are you calling from?"

There is a short silence.

"Can you come get me?" says Peter.

May's knees almost give out. She catches herself on the dresser, keeps pushing toward the closet. Grabs her coat and yanks it out.

"What happened, Peter?"

Peter says dully, "Ben is dead." A small, small silence. "He got shot."

May is struck, then, by something unexpected. It is not shock and it is not grief, though it is, somehow, just as painful.

It is certainty.

She made the wrong choice.

She made the wrong choice.

May slumps under the weight of it. The obviousness. She made the wrong choice, and now she is not where she needs to be.

But she has to get there.

“Peter,” she says, and her voice does not sound like her own. “I’m coming to get you, okay? I’m coming to get you.”

Instead of a reply, there is a dull clunking sound as the call drops. The line goes dead.

It takes May she does not know how long to realize she has fallen to her knees. She is sitting on the floor in front of her closet, clutching her cell phone and staring at the now-blank screen, and when she comes back to her body she does so with a sob.

She chokes it back. Gets to her feet. Grabs her coat, her shoes, and her purse. And that is all.

May heads for the door. Somehow makes it down the stairs on numb, stumbling legs while her fingers fumble to redial the unknown number. It is not Peter who picks up but a receptionist, who gives her the precinct number and address. May calls Peter’s phone next, but it cuts straight to messages. She sends a text anyway—*I’m coming honey, hold on*—and then she calls her brothers.

Neither one answers.

“*Shit.*”

She keeps calling while she fumbles in the basket by the door, trying to find her keys and hardly aware that there are tears cascading down her face, hardly aware that she is barely breathing when —

“Just where the hell do you think you’re going?”

May whirls around, keys in hand, and finds her mother, sitting in her wheelchair near the door that leads to her first-floor bedroom, wig askew, mouth contorted.

“Ma,” May gasps. “I have to go. It’s—Peter called. Oh God, he said—Ma, Ben is dead.”

Joy regards her daughter for a moment, eyes narrowed.

“And why is that your problem?” she says.

May almost loses her grip on her keys. Her knees buckle again; she catches herself against the doorway.

“He’s—it’s Peter. He’s all alone, he’s—” She gulps, gasps again. There is a sharp pain swelling at the center of her body. “I have to go get him.”

Joy’s expression goes from cold to furious in the space of a second.

“What the hell are you talking about?” she says. “You can’t bring a child here. *His* child? That’s not your responsibility, May! You aren’t even related! And how am I supposed to manage with that many people in my house? You know how hard it is for me as it is, you’re barely here to help—and now I’m supposed to turn my attentions to some boy you barely know because a man you aren’t married to anymore is dead? Put your coat away, May, you aren’t going.”

It’s the finality in her mother’s voice that does it, more than what she’s saying. The dismissal. The man May isn’t married to anymore is dead. And May wasn’t there.

May stops crying. She takes a breath. She walks into the kitchen, where her mother keeps the cordless landline. Joy continues to rant, watching her daughter with small, keen eyes, barely pausing to draw breath as she lists all of the reasons May has to stay—until May throws the phone at her.

The receiver hits Joy in the chest with a quiet, hollow thud. It bounces off her bony breast and lands in her lap.

Joy makes a choking sound and goes silent, her mouth half open. She stares down at the phone like she has never seen one before in her life.

“It’s called a phone,” May snarls. “Call someone or don’t. I’m going to get my nephew.”

Joy makes another strangled sound of surprise, but she is still too shocked to speak. Her eyes follow May as she makes her way back to the front door, where she pauses, turns back, and looks her mother in the eye.

“And Ma?” she says, waiting until she’s sure her mother is listening. “Go fuck yourself.”

Joy finds her voice, then. Her screams follow May out the door.

May climbs into her car, and she heads home.

She Just Got Lost

May misses him by ten minutes.

That is what the sleepy-eyed receptionist at the police station tells her when she arrives three hours later, having broken every speed limit and ignored every traffic sign on her way into the city. It's a miracle she didn't get pulled over on her way, but she is still too late: Child Protective Services has come and gone, and in the process they somehow found some distant relatives of Ben's to take Peter, at least for tonight. And even though there was paperwork to fill out and arrangements to make, they are gone before May arrives.

Ten minutes. If she hadn't stopped to argue with her mother she might have made it. If she had just left...

May didn't even know Ben had cousins. She asks for their names, but the receptionist doesn't have them—or maybe just doesn't care—and she informs May that even if she did, she wouldn't just give it out to some random woman in her pajamas who looks like she wandered in straight from the nearest shelter.

"I'm not homeless," says May numbly. "My husband was shot."

This information does not seem to inspire any sympathy in the receptionist, but she does stop trying to turn May away. Instead, she pages the detective in charge of the case, who is just as sleepy-eyed, and who leads May into his office in the back while in her head the knowledge of her failure plays in her head like a chant: *Ten minutes. I missed him by ten minutes.*

She can barely hear what the detective is saying, but she forces herself to listen. It was a random mugging, as far as they can tell. The guy probably wanted Ben's wallet, but he didn't get it: he spooked when the gun went off and ran for it. The police will do their best, says the detective, his intonation rote and dull, but she probably shouldn't get her hopes up. These things happen all the time.

"What about Peter?"

It's the only thing May really wants to know.

Just as the receptionist said, they can't release any information about Peter or his whereabouts to someone who is not his immediate family. May can try to get in touch with CPS, but they'll likely tell her the same thing.

The detective tells her he is sorry for her loss, and he shows her to the door.

May exits the precinct. It is almost morning: the sun is just beginning to rise. May stares at the tinge of pink between buildings in the distance, breath rising in a cool mist in front of her face, and then she pulls her phone out of her purse.

Once again, Peter's number cuts to voicemail.

She closes her eyes, squeezes them shut to will away the gray static that is encroaching on all edges of her thoughts, and when she opens them she dials a different number—the office of the lawyer who handled her and Ben's divorce.

Of course they are not open at this hour. May leaves a message. She goes back to her car and gets

behind the wheel but does not turn it on because as soon as she is inside she realizes she does not have anywhere to go.

May puts her forehead on the steering wheel. She breathes. For a while, it is all she can do.

At some point she must fall asleep, because the next thing she knows she is being awakened by her phone for the second time in fewer than eight hours, and even though the sun has risen fully her hands are numb with cold. It takes her a moment to answer.

It's the lawyer. She received May's message, and the police contacted her as well. She tells May to come to her office: apparently, they have a lot to discuss.

The lawyer's name is Alex. She is in her mid-thirties but looks younger, and she has made a point of keeping May's cup of coffee fresh and hot since she arrived, though May has barely drank anything. May has always liked Alex. It was impossible, of course, for the divorce to be anything but terrible, but Alex did her best. She's about as inexpensive as a New York City lawyer can be, too, and it shows in both the size and relative shabbiness of her office, in which May is currently seated. Apparently Ben retained her services even after the divorce was finalized, because Alex has a copy of his will spread out on her desk between them. May didn't know this. She didn't know Ben had a will, either.

"He left everything to Peter," Alex tells her. "Unfortunately, there wasn't a lot to leave. Ben had some savings, but he depleted them pretty significantly when he lost his job a few months ago. He was building it back up, but there's just a few thousand dollars left in the account."

May hadn't known that Ben lost his job, either. She allows herself a moment of sharp sadness for missing that too, and then she sets it aside. The money doesn't matter now.

"What about Peter?" she says. "Where did Ben want him to go?"

"He wanted him to go to you."

May almost slides to the floor in relief. She has to set her coffee down to keep from spilling it.

"So... what do we do? Can we contact CPS? How long until I can go pick him up?"

"Hold on, May," Alex says. "It's not going to be as simple as just grabbing him from his cousins."

"Why not?"

May is immediately impatient. The impulse to self-flagellate for her lateness is fading, replaced by increasingly unbearable thoughts of what Peter must be going through at this moment. The detective said he was right next to Ben when it happened.

"Ben wanted me," she says, "I want Peter, what's the problem?"

Alex raises her eyebrows, gentle.

“I spoke to CPS this morning, May. It seems the cousins have expressed an interest in a permanent agreement as well.”

“What? *Why*? I didn’t even know Ben *had* cousins. Have they ever met Peter? Have they—?”

“They’re his blood relatives,” says Alex. “That gives them an edge. They’re also married, they have a home in the city, and at least one of them is employed. That gives them an even bigger edge.”

May clenches her hands in her lap. They are shaking so hard she almost can’t do it.

“Ben wanted *me*.”

“And that’s good. The courts tend to favor the wishes of the deceased in cases like this, but like I said, it’s not cut-and-dry. You and Ben were divorced. You never signed a formal agreement regarding the succession of guardianship. These are complicating factors, May.”

“I’m his family,” May croaks. “It’s not complicated.”

“I’m going to help you,” says Alex, ever-patient, “we just have to proceed carefully. If you were to get Peter, what would you do? Take him back to your mother?”

“No,” says May immediately. She is done with Gloucester. “Ben wanted Peter to stay in the city, and that’s where he’s going to stay.”

“Then you’ll need to find a job. Income is going to be the biggest thing.”

May nods. She still has connections at her former hospital. She should be able to get her old job back. More daunting is the idea of finding somewhere to stay—New York City real estate is a nightmare no matter what borough she chooses, but she has made up her mind, without really thinking about it, that they will stay in Queens. Peter has had enough chaos without being shunted out of the neighborhood where he grew up.

But as it turns out, this part has already been taken care of.

“The condo is still in your name,” says Alex. “Yours and Ben’s. He indicates in his will that he’d like you to stay there, with Peter. Should the need ever arise.”

Tears rise to the back of May’s throat. The condo had been their first purchase as a married couple, a tiny fixer-upper in what used to be a somewhat undesirable part of Queens—hence the affordability. They had done the fixing-up together. It was their only real asset, and when the time had come to divide things up following the divorce they just... hadn’t. Hadn’t even talked about it. It was unspoken, but it was mutually understood: the apartment was theirs, even after “they” had ceased to be.

May still has her own keys. They are sitting in the bottom of her purse.

“Okay,” she says, swallowing the stickiness in her voice. “I can do all of that. How do I get in touch with Peter?”

Alex folds her hands on top of the will.

“I’ll get in touch with CPS,” she says, “let them know you’re looking to move forward with a

guardianship, and that you'd like to see him, but until you've got his papers in-hand, I wouldn't get your hopes up. CPS will need to approve the visit, and they'll probably want to supervise it—and they'll need to speak to the cousins, who may or may not be okay with it. It's going to take a few weeks, and even then they might decide it's just not worth the hassle."

May's mouth has gone dry. She says, "Not acceptable."

"May..."

"No. *No*. He's—he was standing *right there* when his uncle got shot. Right next to him. And then he called me and I didn't get there in time and he—what if he thinks I just didn't come? They took his phone, I have no way of contacting him—I can't let him think I just *didn't come*."

"For now, you have to," says Alex firmly. "We don't want to give them any reason to reject your application, and disrespecting CPS's current decision about his placement is one of the ways you could do that. I'll be as fast as I can, I promise. I have contacts in CPS who might be able to help. But the best thing you can do in the meantime is wait. Can you do that?"

May suddenly feels tight. Not just in her throat or her chest but everywhere—like a hand-wound clock that is one gear-twist away from shattering into all its innumerable pieces. *Ten minutes*, she thinks.

May nods.

"Okay."

Alex reaches across the table, touches the space between them as though she hopes May will offer a hand, but May does not. She cannot. They are still tightly clenched in her lap. After a moment, Alex withdraws.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," she says.

May does not reply.

May leaves the lawyer's office. She drives, almost without noticing what she is doing, to the apartment in Queens. Lets herself in and then stands in the dark kitchen for a long time, staring at the shadows of the home that was once hers and barely breathing, trying to will herself to turn on the lights. In the end she does not: she goes, instead, to Peter's room. It's as she remembers it: the bunk bed stacked high with pilfered junk for his projects, the walls plastered with news clippings—stories about superheroes. His dresser drawers are all ajar, and some clothes are missing, but this is the only hint that he is not going to come bounding through the front door at any moment, carrying an armful of old electronics and jabbering about the things he is going to build with them.

May closes the drawers, but that's it. Everything else she leaves as it is. For when Peter gets home.

She goes to Ben's bedroom.

Much like Peter's, Ben's is preserved in the state in which he left it. The bed is unmade, but not as though it was slept in—more like he pulled the covers back, but never climbed under them. Further

testament to this is his watch, laid out on the bedside table: Ben only took it off to sleep, so he must have been in the process of getting ready for bed when something made him stop. May approaches the watch, ghosts her fingers over it, but before she can summon the nerve to pick it up, she spots what is beside it: a photo, framed and facing the bed. She picks this up instead, and is surprised to find that she is looking at herself. Herself and Ben and Peter, standing on the beach at Coney Island and looking windswept as they grin and wave at the camera.

The photo is from last summer. A stranger looking at it would never know the laughing, bright-eyed adults were not a couple. They would never know the mop-headed kid between them was not their son.

Before she can stop herself, May has sunk onto the bed, clutching the photo to her chest.

She cries and cries.

May sleeps through most of the next day. Besides those initial tears, this is the only concession she allows herself, and only because she knows it is necessary: she needs her head on straight for everything that is going to come next. When she wakes, she washes her face, makes the bed, and picks up her phone.

She calls the head nurse at her old unit, who says they are in need of someone to work night shifts. It's not going to be ideal with a thirteen-year-old to take care of, but May says she will take it: as Alex said, income is key.

What comes next is more unpleasant: May opens her contacts, and Ben's Facebook page, and she begins making calls. She has to tell the people he knew that he is dead, yes, but if it weren't for Peter she might have given herself more time to prepare for that unpleasant task.

Her real motive is finding out who the cousins are, and where they live.

She knows Alex told her not to. But she doesn't intend to *use* the information for anything. She just can't stand the idea of not knowing where Peter is. And she's going to have to find out eventually, anyway, because she is going to have to go and retrieve him when she gains guardianship.

It takes a few hours, but eventually she gets what she is after. An old friend of Ben's parents remembers that Ben's aunt used to visit the Parker house, way back in the sixties, and that she would sometimes bring what the friend describes as "her ugly little son." By some miracle, the friend remembers their names, and from there it takes just a quick Google search to obtain an address: Dennis Arlington and his wife live in Crown Heights.

Peter is still in New York.

It takes just about every ounce of willpower May has not to simply get in her car and drive straight to the Arlingtons' front door. But she doesn't. No risks, she tells herself. There is too much on the line.

She closes her computer, and she gets back to work.

The weeks that follow are a harrowing mix of crushing grief and untenable monotony, and May almost can't decide which is worse: the agony of remembering Ben—sharpened into permanence by her current surroundings, which stab her with reminders of all that she missed and all she will never have again every time she turns a corner—would undoubtedly win out, were it not for the agony of waiting for Peter.

May has never been a particularly patient person. If given the choice between standing still and moving, she has always chosen to move—it's an aspect of her personality that was, for most of her life, an asset. It got her out of Massachusetts when she was younger. It got her Ben, too: because he was too intimidated to ask her out when they first met, May had taken the initiative and asked him.

In recent years, though, May has acquired the skill, thanks to her mother. Or so she thought. But it turns out holding her tongue while her mother screamed obscenities about a burnt meatloaf is not the same as waiting to see the kid she has known since he was born, and who is currently—probably—under the impression she abandoned him. In retrospect, the first was merely irritating. The second is as close to unbearable as anything May has ever experienced.

Somehow she bears it. She starts her new job, and that is good, both for the money—a good portion of which she uses to keep Alex on retainer—and the distraction. When she is not working she throws herself into the apartment, scrubbing every surface and stocking the fridge and clearing out the dust-laden vents in anticipation of the inevitable CPS visit, which Alex promises is coming: she has submitted May's petition for guardianship. Now it is just a matter of waiting to hear back.

Another distraction crops up, too, a few days after May arrives in New York. That distraction is her brothers, who, having eventually pulled themselves out of their respective beds and made their way to Joy's house the night May left, have been taking care of her ever since. It seems it took them a while to realize May had no intention of coming back, but now that they have they are none too pleased. David, nearly incoherent with rage, calls her three days after the shooting, threatening to report her for elder abuse if she doesn't return to Gloucester immediately.

He doesn't ask about Ben, or Peter. May hangs up without saying a word.

"Don't block them," Alex advises when May brings it up, worried it might affect her chances at gaining custody, "keep every text and threatening message. I'd be shocked if they take you to court—it would be cheaper to just put her in a home—but if they do we want evidence that they're the neglectful ones in this instance."

So May keeps her phone on, but stops answering it when her brothers' names arise, and she rides out the waves of malice they both send in her direction, each one a reminder that she is alone in this—that she always has been

At first these waves sting. But eventually May learns to ride them. She lets them buffer her, carrying her toward the realization that leaving her family behind has not left her isolated, like her brothers and mother have always told her it would: Instead, it has set her free.

So she sets her sights on the only real family she has left, and she keeps going.

Six weeks pass. And then May gets a phone call.

It is not from her brothers. It is a New York area code, and May always feels a little jolt of anticipation when she receives those, always answers immediately, hoping it will be Peter on the other end, calling to find out why she hasn't retrieved him yet. It never is—so far it has mostly

been old acquaintances of Ben's, calling to offer their condolences—but May answers this one immediately nonetheless, hope springing anew.

Of course it is not Peter. It is, in fact, the county coroner, calling to let her know that the police have released Ben's body, and that she was listed as the responsible party.

A renewed torrent of mourning washes over her. In all her preparations for Peter, she did not even think about making preparations for Ben. But of course something will need to be done.

Not a funeral. She and Ben talked about it—the way all married couples do when they are young: with the conviction that they are discussing something serious, something necessary, but neither of them really believing they will ever have to think about it in the context of anything real. Everyone feels immortal when they are young and in love. Everyone is wrong.

Regardless, May knows what Ben wanted: cremation, ashes scattered in the ocean. No funeral—he'd been to too many during the short course of his life, and didn't want to subject anyone to another. For this, May is grateful. She does not know if she could handle making arrangements for yet another memorial service on top of everything else.

But there is something she needs to do. She cannot just claim Ben's ashes and scatter them on her own.

There is someone else who needs to say goodbye.

May's first impression of the Arlingtons' duplex, when she arrives in front of it that late June evening, is not one of welcoming comfort, like she was hoping it would be—for Peter's sake, if not her own. The single-story duplex is old; the foundation is sagging; there is a twisted chain-link fence all around the yard, which is mostly dirt with just a few clumps of grass. May has to triple-check the address when she pulls up in front of it, because her first thought is one of disbelief: is this what CPS decided was *best* for Peter?

But it's a thought she quickly checks. Outward appearances don't mean much: it's not as though her apartment is some sort of palace. And the station wagon in which she has arrived passed the two-hundred-thousand mile mark long before she pulled onto this dilapidated street. What matters, she tells herself, is that these people want Peter, and regardless of their means, they are putting up a fight to keep him. Resentful though she might be, considering her own position on the subject, May is *not* here to make things ugly. That's not what today is about.

As she throws the car into park, she glances into the back. There, buckled into the center seat, is the cardboard box the coroner gave her, which contains Ben's ashes. May thought it might feel morbid, having him in the car like this, but it felt worse to even think about putting him in the trunk.

"I'm here," she murmurs as she climbs out of the car. "I'm close."

She doesn't know who she is talking to—the ashes? Peter?—but either way, there is no response.

She makes the short trek between the curb and the front door, raises her hand, and knocks.

Beyond the flimsy front door, May can hear a low, rhythmic clanging. It is superseded by a set of

heavy footfalls, which get louder as they approach the door. It swings open so suddenly May takes a startled step back, nearly loses her footing on the stairs. When she catches herself, she has to reorient her gaze: the man who opened the door is a good six inches shorter than she is. He has a bald head and a squat, unpleasant face, and before May can even think to introduce herself he sweeps over her with his small eyes and says, “We don’t want whatever it is.”

May only just manages to regain herself before he slams the door in her face. She sticks out an arm to prevent this and the look on the man’s face when he realizes what she’s done suggests she might as well have slapped him.

“Sorry.” May releases the door. “I’m just—are you Dennis? Dennis Arlington?”

The man’s eyes narrow. “Who’s asking?”

His immediate, unmitigated coldness has thrown May off. As has the strong smell of cat litter emanating from within the duplex, and the increased clanging, which May thinks might be coming from some ill-maintained clothes dryer. All of these things are such a contrast to what she was expecting from the people who are, according to her lawyer, just as determined to keep Peter as she is to reclaim him, that for a moment May just stares at him, her mouth hanging open. When her voice comes unstuck in her throat she simply says, “Is Peter here?”

Mr. Arlington’s eyes narrow even further.

“Are you a social worker? Because we already had his visit and everything was in perfect shape. And I have to say, we don’t exactly appreciate you showing up unannounced at all hours—”

“I’m not.” May forces some of her befuddlement back, stands taller. “I’m... I apologize, I know this is unexpected, but I didn’t have your phone number to call ahead. I’m not with CPS, I’m—my name is May Parker.”

Abruptly, Mr. Arlington turns his head and barks over his shoulder, “Uma! Get over here!”

There are more footsteps. These ones shuffle where the others were heavy, and it’s quickly apparent why. The woman who appears is almost identical to her husband in stature and demeanor, and who is wearing slippers and a ratty, ancient bathrobe. She smells so powerfully of vodka that for a moment it supersedes the cat litter.

A terrible feeling is building in May’s abdomen and in the back of her head, hot and heavy. It feels like a premonition—just like the night Ben died, when the phone rang and she knew what she would hear when she picked it up.

“What?” the woman snaps. “Goddammit, Dennis, I told you to—” She cuts herself off when she spots May. Just like her husband, she narrows her eyes. “Who are you?”

“I’m—” May swallows. “May Parker. I’m here to see Peter.”

Mrs. Arlington joins her husband in the doorway. Shoulder-to-shoulder, their block-like bodies obscure the inside of the apartment completely. Inside, the clanging goes on.

“So,” says Mrs. Arlington, “you’re the bitch.”

It is May’s turn to flinch as though slapped. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, very good, play dumb,” Mrs. Arlington snarls. “Here to see the boy, hm? And what exactly is it you plan to say to him? Going to try to convince him how much better off he’d be with you?”

Going to give him a few ideas to feed to his social worker the next time he comes around, give yourself a little edge? Well, I think not. No ma'am, I think the best thing you can do is take your fancy little ass and get off my doorstep, how about that?"

May can't help it; she looks down at herself. She thought it was probably a long shot that the Arlingtons would let Peter come with her to scatter Ben's ashes right away, but on the slight chance that they would she came dressed in a simple black suit. It's far from fancy; she isn't even wearing jewelry.

"I just..." May is still finding it hard to form words. "What the hell are you talking about?"

To May's enormous shock, Mrs. Arlington steps forward and jabs a fat finger right into her chest.

"You're all alike, aren't you? Rich, pretty little know-nothings who think they can just swoop in the moment someone in the family kicks it and start collecting what isn't theirs. Well, I'll tell you, missy, your ploy won't work. My husband and I might not be wealthy, but I'll tell you we work for a living, and anything the government gives us goes straight to toward caring for that boy, isn't that right, Dennis?"

"That's right, dear."

"That's right." Mrs. Arlington nods, her jowls quivering. "So if you think you can swoop in and take *our* check, after we put ourselves on the line to take care of the boy—"

"Stop."

May puts up a hand. She closes her eyes, because the realization that is forming in her mind has manifested as a sharp, swelling pain behind her left eye. When she opens them, the Arlingtons are still scowling at her.

May says, "You only took Peter for the social security?"

Mrs. Arlington scoffs. "Oh, I see. Little Miss Holier-Than-Thou, is it? Well, where were you the night his uncle bit the dust, hm? Wanted to make sure he was good and dead before you made your move, I suppose? Well, *we* were there. *We* picked him up and *we* kept him. Put him in school, make sure he's got three square meals a day, nevermind that he's constantly underfoot, always snivelling—"

All at once, thoughts of civility flee May's head. They are replaced by something else, something much more potent: a humming, insensate rage.

She feels almost absent from her body when she speaks. Her voice does not sound like her own. She says, "Where's my nephew?"

"Oh, so suddenly he's your nephew? Well, where—"

Mrs. Arlington gasps when May surges forward, puts a shoulder down, and pushes her way into the duplex.

"Dennis! Stop her!"

"Now, see here—!"

May is already making her way past the threshold, eyes scanning—she sees dirty dishes on the countertops in the kitchens, empty liquor bottles on the floor. A cat streaks past her as she storms

into the living room, where an ancient, staticky television is playing a soap opera on mute.

“Peter? Peter!”

Peter is not in any of these rooms. The deeper she gets in the duplex, the louder the clanging from the dryer, and May turns toward it: it is coming from a half-open door on one end of the living room.

“Peter!”

As she draws closer, May sees stairs, leading down.

Before she can open the door, two pairs of stubby hands wrap around her arms and drag her back. May struggles—clawing at the hands, spitting obscenities, still almost absent from herself and barely aware of what she’s doing, her only clear thought of getting to Peter, of getting him out—but she is outmatched by the pair of them, these so-called cousins who only want Peter for what they can get out of him. The Arlingtons drag her back down the hallway, and they shove her out the front door.

May stumbles. She’s wearing heels; her ankle twists, and there is a burst of white-hot pain. She grabs the railing just in time to avoid tumbling down the stairs, but she still goes down in a heap on the uppermost step, legs curled beneath her, ankle throbbing, head spinning.

May looks up in time to see Mrs. Arlington point her stubby finger down, directly in her face.

“We’ll see about this, little miss,” says Mrs. Arlington. “We’ll just see about this.”

And she slams the door in May’s face. May hears the deadbolt slide into place. Beyond it, the clanging goes on.

May sits on the stoop for what feels like a very long time, staring at that closed door. When she gets to her feet she does so slowly, numbly, hardly registering the pain in her ankle as she limps her way back to her car. She gets inside and stares at the box in her back seat for a long time, until the twilight fades to darkness and the lights in the Arlingtons’ duplex are shut off.

May drives home. And she starts making calls.

“Can I ask you a question?” says Alex, striding into her office, where May has been waiting for her for the last half hour. She takes a seat behind her desk, folds her hands, and looks May dead in the eye. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

May has her swollen ankle propped on the second chair in front of Alex’s desk. It’s sprained but not broken; regardless, the pain, in combination with everything else that happened yesterday, kept her up most of the night. At Alex’s inquiry, she puts her face in her hands, scrubs them through her hair.

“I know,” she says. “I know, it was stupid. I lost my temper.”

“You shouldn’t have been there in the first place. Damn it, May, I told you to *stay away from him*, and now—”

"I know!" May raises her head. "I know. I wasn't thinking. Or—I was thinking, but I wasn't thinking clearly. I just... he insisted. When his parents died, Peter insisted on going to the funeral, even though he was barely out of the hospital, and the thought of him not being there when Ben... I just, I got lost. I'm sorry."

Some of the angry disbelief in Alex's expression wanes, but not all of it.

"Do you have any idea the shitstorm you've just created?" she says.

"They only wanted Peter for the money."

"Yes," says Alex bluntly. "It's foster care. If nobody was in it for the money there wouldn't be enough homes for one eighth of the kids in the system. The ones who get placed because they're *actually wanted* are rare. And now you've ruined Peter's chances of being one of them."

May's throat immediately tightens. "They can't reject my application."

Alex makes a noise of disbelief.

"Are you kidding me? You showed up at Peter's residence, broke into the home, and by all accounts acted like you intended to kidnap him in front of his legally-appointed custodians. How well did you really think that was going to play out in front of a judge?"

May sits up, not caring that it sends an electric jolt of pain through her tender ankle.

"Has anyone *actually* seen the conditions he's living in? There was alcohol everywhere, I'm pretty sure they were keeping him in the *basement* —"

"May. *I don't care*. And neither does CPS."

May sinks back. She can actually *feel* herself going pale. "They're blacklisting me."

Alex shakes her head. "Worse. I spoke to my contact at CPS. May, they took out a protective order against you."

"A what? You mean a *restraining order*? Are you fucking kidding me? They're the ones who tried to shove *me* down a flight of stairs!"

"After you broke into their home!" Alex says. "How are you not getting this? This is serious, May!"

May sinks a little further. Anger is morphing into shame. She lowers her head when she says, "I don't want to go near them. I just want to get Peter out."

Alex takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly through her nose.

"May," she says, "the protection order isn't for the Arlingtons. It's for Peter."

Suddenly May feels like she weighs nothing at all: like she might float right off this chair and into the great wide nothingness of the sky.

"They can't do that," she says. Her mouth is dry. "They don't even want him."

"It wasn't the Arlingtons," says Alex. "They have custody, but CPS are his guardians. They applied for the order last night."

“But... they weren’t there. No one was there, it’s their word against mine, they can’t—”

“You called CPS, May. You called them twelve times, ranting like a crazy person—”

“Because I wanted to get Peter out of there!”

“Yes! And because you didn’t wait, because you didn’t consult with me before *losing your fucking mind* on the organization that currently has custody of your kid, you went ahead and corroborated everything the Arlingtons are claiming! You admitted to being on their property, you admitted to trying to take Peter—you made yourself look just as crazy as the Arlingtons are claiming you are! Of course they took out a restraining order! So I ask again, May, *what were you thinking?*”

May doesn’t feel like she weighs nothing anymore. Now she feels like she is going to be sick.

“They didn’t even want him,” she whispers.

Alex gives a long, exasperated sigh, and she too runs her hands through her hair.

“Okay,” she says, without raising her head. “Okay, listen. I’m going to... see what I can do. I’ll petition the judge who signed the order. We’ll say... we’ll say you were out of your mind with grief, that it was a momentary lapse... Maybe, *maybe* I can get them to lift the order. But I have to be honest with you, May, unless they completely expunge it... and even then, the odds you’re going to get him back now...”

May leans forward, urgent, and puts her hands on the desk. “You can’t leave him there. You didn’t see it. You didn’t hear the way they talked about him. Like he was some... charity case. Like he was a burden. If he gets stuck there because of me...”

Alex reaches across the desk, just like she did the day after Ben died. This time, she takes May’s hand in hers.

“I’m going to do my best,” she says. “But you need to keep your head down, do you understand me? Do not contact CPS. Stay away from Peter. You do *exactly* as I say, May, or I won’t be able to help you at all.”

And May, because she has no other choice, agrees.

It’s yet another promise she is destined to break.

Two weeks later, May receives another late-night phone call. This time, she is not asleep. She has barely slept at all since that night at the duplex. She did not scatter Ben’s ashes; she keeps them, for now, on her bedside table, so she has something besides the picture of the family she ruined to stare at throughout the night. When her phone rings, she doesn’t even startle. Just rolls over, away from the box, and answers her phone.

“May,” says Alex, “I’m so sorry.”

And she gives her the news.

Peter is no longer with the Arlingtons. He has been arrested on charges of assault, for pushing Mrs. Arlington down a flight of stairs. That is all that Alex knows. What’s more, it’s all she is ever

going to know: her CPS contact will no longer be providing information. The case has become too complicated; she worries that if she continues to speak to Alex, she risks losing her job.

Wherever Peter is going next, only CPS knows.

May, who can taste her stomach in the back of her throat, thanks Alex for everything she has done so far. She hangs up the phone, and when she lowers it, there is a text message on the screen. It is David, threatening once again to track May down if she doesn't return to take care of their mother.

Her brother's threat is like lightning: a flash of realization in an otherwise turbid dark. Immediately, with perfect clarity, May realizes what she has to do.

David won't have to track her down.

May is going home.

Breathless

Morning is creeping over the horizon by the time May pulls the station wagon into her mother's driveway, but she doesn't feel even a hint of tiredness, in spite of the fact she hasn't slept. The drive in from the city is a blur: her focus is all on what's ahead.

The windows of her mother's house are all dark.

May still has her key. She is quiet as climbs onto the porch and lets herself through the front door, a little surprised that her ever-vindictive mother has not changed the locks. She leaves it slightly ajar behind her—both to avoid any noise and to enable a hasty getaway—and creeps past her mother's room, up the staircase, and onto the second floor landing.

The door to Maggie's old room is closed. May had kept it so when she still lived here, and she hopes, as she turns the knob and pushes it open—slowly, slowly—that her brothers have done the same. It's a risk she is going to have to take: the room is too dark for her to see anything more than muted shadows, and so, with no other choice, she flips on the light.

May flinches, but the shape in Maggie's bed is not one of her brothers, waiting in the dark. It is a stack of her sister's old clothes, and a folded pile of blankets. Right where May left them.

She doesn't go for the clothes. She goes, instead, for the stack of boxes along the far wall. She filled those boxes herself, after Maggie died. It looks like her brothers may have gone through them, but it was cursory: though they are slightly more askew than she remembers leaving them, their contents spilling over here and there, nothing seems to be missing. Of course it's not, because Maggie did not have any money, nor many assets. Nothing their brothers would be interested in, anyway.

May, on the other hand, is not here for money.

It takes some digging—the work is slower than she would like, due to the necessity of silence—but eventually May finds the box she is looking for. It is small and is starting to smell like mold from so many years of neglect. It is also full of papers.

May takes her sister's birth certificate. The passport she never used. Her social security card. And finally her driver's license.

This last, May holds for a while, crouched in the corner, and she stares at it while the room slowly fills with sunlight. The picture was taken before Maggie got sick: in it she is smiling, tentative, as was Maggie's way—but she looks good. Like May, Maggie always looked young for her age, and though she had fifteen years on her younger sister at the time of her death, May has closed that gap by a few years in the intervening time. The mousy brown hair isn't a match, but that's an easy fix. Beyond that, the differences are slight. Only noticeable to someone who is looking closely.

If there is one thing May has learned about government entities in the last two and a half months, it is that they are *never* looking very closely.

May stuffs the papers in her purse, and she gets to her feet.

She thinks, as she tiptoes past her old room, that she could peer inside. Try to reclaim some of the clothes she left behind when she fled the night of Ben's death. Or, more importantly, to reclaim the items she used to keep in her bedside table. The picture of Peter with his Lego set. The letter he wrote her on his birthday.

But there is no hesitating this time. Now May understands: her family is in front of her. All else must be left behind.

She leaves the house.

May almost makes it out unnoticed. She makes it, in fact, all the way to her car, where she clambers behind the wheel and turns the key with shaking hands.

It's the sound of the engine that does it: just as May is about to pull out of the driveway for what, this time, will truly be the last time, David comes bursting out of the front door, dressed only in pajama bottoms and wearing the ugliest snarl May has ever seen on his sleep-swollen face. He runs toward her just as she kicks the car into reverse.

May cannot hear what he is screaming at her as he chases the car down the driveway. She doesn't care to. But still, she can't quite resist the urge to give him the finger in her rear window as she peels onto the main road.

The head of the Essex County Health Department used to work with May at the hospital. He was a good friend, then, and it seems he remains one. When May asks for copies of Maggie's death certificate, all he asks is, "How many?"

He doesn't ask anything further. Not even when May replies,

"All of them."

Back in the city, May uses Maggie's ID to sign up for an eight week course at the nearest community college. *Basics of Social Work*.

At first she keeps her job at the hospital. Not just because she needs the income—there is also part of her, small but vocal, that recognizes that what she is thinking of doing is *crazy, crazy, crazy*. This same small part is the one that hopes none of it will become necessary. That Alex will call her, one day soon, and let her know that the restraining order has been lifted, that the courts have recognized that she wasn't behaving irrationally, that night at the Arlingtons, and that the best place for Peter is where he was meant to be all along: at home, with her. But the weeks wear on, and no call arrives. And after a while, Alex stops answering May's calls, too.

May knows what the silence means. She is not getting the restraining order lifted. She is not getting Peter back. She will not even get to know where he *is*.

(These are the questions that haunt her night: is the new family being kind to him? Have they given him a room, or are they keeping him in the basement too? Is he even *in* a home, or were CPS stupid enough to believe the Arlingtons? Did they send him to juvie? Who is taking care of him? Who is loving him? Who is telling him that none of this is his fault?)

She is going to have to take things into her own hands.

“I’m going to be forthright here, Miss—uhm, Espinosa—”

“Esposito. But Margaret is fine.”

“Right. Esposito. Margaret. Look, to be very honest, you’re a little underqualified. Your volunteer work is very impressive, but seeing as you mostly worked with the elderly...”

May shifts a little in her seat. The suit she picked up for the interview is secondhand, and a little too small. Her scalp itches from the hasty dye-job she performed at home last night. But neither of these things make her as uncomfortable as the fact that, besides the certificate noting her successful completion of the community college course a few weeks ago, none of the information sitting on the interviewer’s desk is actually about her. The resume, the volunteer experience, the photocopy of her driver’s license—all of these are Maggie’s.

But as far as the interviewer knows, that’s exactly who’s sitting in front of her.

“I know it’s a little sparse,” says May. The desire to scratch her scalp is overwhelming. She quells it. “It’s a—career change, for sure. I know it’s not on there, but I actually raised my—um, my brothers.” Again, that was Maggie. “When they were little. So I’m not charging in totally blind.”

If anything, the interviewer looks more skeptical at this.

“Okay,” she says. “Do you mind if I ask what prompted this—ah—career change? I mean... I think I also need to tell you, this isn’t a highly-paid position. And if you’re looking to make a career in social work, you really need more than a certificate. An associate’s, at minimum, but a bachelor’s is really—”

“My husband died.”

It’s out of her mouth before May can really think about what she’s saying—the first bit of truth she’s offered since she entered the interviewer’s office an hour ago, and done so totally unintentionally.

Well. Too late to take it back now. The interviewer has opened her eyes a little wider, sat up a little straighter. It’s the first thing May has said the entire time that interests her. She might as well go with it.

“My husband died,” May says again, more slowly this time. “It was a mugging. Unexpected. And ever since then... I can’t go back to the life I had before. That life doesn’t exist anymore.”

The interviewer softens, just a little. “Of course not,” she says. “I, uh, I actually lost my partner as well. Not—nothing like what happened to yours, but I—nothing’s ever the same, is it?”

May shakes her head. Her throat feels constricted. She is suddenly both elated and terrified: the constriction feels like hope.

“No,” she agrees. “It’s never the same. But that’s what I’ve realized, since he died. I don’t want it to be the same. I want... I want it to be better. I mean, *I* want to be better. I can’t just... coast through life thinking everything works out, somehow. I want to know that I’m making it work. That I’m making some sort of difference.”

The skepticism doesn't exactly disappear from the interviewer's face, but it is joined, now, by an expression of sympathy. She leans forward slightly and says, "Why social work? Why Child Protective Services?"

Now, May hesitates. The truth is the first thing she's said that got her anywhere, but now she knows she has to be selective with that truth if she wants to get any further.

When she speaks, she speaks slowly. Deliberately.

"I... don't sleep well," she says. "I lay awake at night, thinking about the ones that I lost. About how much I miss..." She laughs, mostly to cover the quaver in her voice, partly to stop herself from saying the name she was about to say. "Sometimes, when I'm laying awake like that, I get this thought. I think, *I'm just a kid*. And then I remember: I'm not. I'm this... fully grown woman, and I still feel so lost sometimes. So much like a child. And then I think, how much worse must that feeling be for the ones who are actually kids? How much more lonely, not knowing... not knowing who's really there for you? Not knowing if you're really on your own?" May takes a shuddering breath. "That's why I'm here. If I can help one kid feel less alone, I think... I think maybe I'll sleep better at night."

May gets the job.

In the weeks before the job begins, May spends hours fantasizing about that first day. About how she will figure out how to use her new credentials to access Peter's file. About how, if he is still in the city, she will get in her car as soon as the day is over and drive to wherever he is staying. Not to burst inside this time—she won't make that mistake again. Just to scope it out. Just to make sure he is safe, until she can—

But that is where the fantasy always stops short. The restraining order is still in place. She is still paying Alex monthly, to try to lift it, but besides a few terse emails, now, there aren't any updates, and certainly no movement in a positive direction. And if Alex knew what May was actually doing with her time...

It's a hurdle she'll have to leap when she comes to it. For now, she just wants to know Peter is safe.

It's been almost five months since Ben died. May almost can't believe it—those months have felt simultaneously interminable and like they happened so quickly she can barely remember them passing. Five months, and she hasn't spoken to Peter once. Hasn't seen his face, hasn't heard his voice. Hasn't been able to tell him how sorry she is.

She can dwell on it, she thinks, as she arrives on the front steps of the featureless cement building that is New York City's CPS office, or she can keep moving forward.

She chooses the latter.

It quickly becomes apparent, however, that she won't be driving to see Peter today. Or any day soon. The first weeks of her employment as a Child Advocate are all set aside for training: lifeless team-building exercises, droning HR videos, learning to use the clunky, ancient computer. May will not see her first case for another month.

Nevertheless, she does it. She arrives on time and attends the trainings and meets every tired, disgruntled coworker with a smile, and never, ever lets on that inside she is screaming with impatience, never lets on that every day that passes feels more and more like the thorn that has been burrowing toward her heart since the Peter called from the station is inching ever closer to its goal.

There's no other way that she can see, so she staves it off, and she keeps going.

Her third week on the job, she accompanies her supervisor to a court case, as an observer. The little girl in question has been removed from her home due to abuse: her father slammed her into a wall so hard and so many times she now has permanent brain damage. She is five years old. The courts are trying to decide if her mother—who was present for the abuse but did not participate—is fit to be her caretaker.

May sits next to the little girl throughout, distracts her with toys and books and games of peek-a-boo, even though she should be too old for it. When the day concludes and the girl's mother takes her home, May just barely makes it into the women's room before the acid that has been rising in her throat makes its appearance.

Please not that, she thinks, and she is so afraid of accidentally speaking such horror into existence that she doesn't even attach the silent plea to a name. *Please anything but that*.

It's the first time, over the course of the year that follows, that May will think it.

It will not be the last.

When—finally, finally—May is finished with orientation, her supervisor asks if she has a preference for who she wants to work with. Most child advocates have age groups they work with specifically, groups they are trained for, but since May is so green, she is going to do most of her training on-the-job.

She asks to work with teenage boys, and her supervisor looks stunned: no one wants to work with teenage boys.

Stunned—but pleased.

She assigns May to a harried, exhausted-looking woman with a limp, whose office is literally in the building's basement. The exhausted woman introduces herself as Linda, and then she hands May a stack of folders.

Peter's is among them.

It's the first bit of luck May has had since Ben died. Maybe since long before that. She is so surprised, so elated at the ease of it that she can barely contain herself as she sits down at the card table in the corner that is her desk. She has to remind herself to breathe, to look calm and collected

and professional as she shuffles it to the front of the pile and opens it.

The feeling does not remain.

At the top of the file is a picture. It is a picture of Peter, and from the date in the upper right corner, it was taken the night that Ben died. The Peter in this picture looks nothing like the one May knows. Nothing like the smiling goofball in the photo on her nightstand, nothing like the hypervocal, excited kid she watched grow up from the moment he was born. This Peter looks almost ghost-like, pallid and distant, like the photographer only managed to capture half of him. He is looking at the camera, but he is not there.

There are bloodstains on his shirt.

May stares at the photo for a long time, willing herself to breathe, to *just keep breathing* and don't cry, because if she starts crying Linda might see, and then Linda will know, or suspect, or at the very least think May isn't cut out for this, and she can't risk it, not when she is finally, finally one step closer to finding him.

She pulls herself together, therefore, and forces herself to take a breath.

Just as May is about to flip to the next page, however, Linda snatches the file out from under her nose.

"Sorry," she says, "that one shouldn't have been in there."

"Wait, I—"

"Don't worry," says Linda, perhaps catching on to some of the abject horror that May cannot, this time, keep off her face, "it's a good thing. We just placed him with one of our better families. He's one hell of a lucky kid, Parker. Not a lot of foster parents are willing to take on one with a record like that—he got the only one who is. But anyway, he's in good hands. I'd rather have you on the tougher cases for now." She nods at the still-large stack on May's card table. "I wish I could start you simple, Margaret, but you're the first help I've had all year. I need you where you're going to do the most good."

At this, May feels a mixture of anguish and relief.

"So he's—that boy, he's in a good home?"

Linda resumes her seat at her own desk, which is real but rickety, and stacked with twice as many files as May's. She tosses Peter's file into a drawer as she sits, locks it.

"The best we've got."

The knowledge that Peter is safe is not everything, but it is something. It is enough, anyway, that she is able to breathe through her days. And breathing has become exceedingly necessary, because May's days are suddenly, inescapably busy, in the worst of ways.

Within a couple of weeks, it is abundantly apparent why her supervisor looked so shocked when May said she wanted to work with teenage boys. It is even more apparent why Linda looks so

exhausted all the time, and why she was so eager to dump the pile of folders in May's lap. The boys in May's caseload have, for the most part, been in the system longer than they have been out of it. A few of them have foster families, but they are in the minority: most of them are living in group homes, halfway houses, transitional housing—which, for many of them, seems like it is merely a pit stop between visits to juvie. For the most part, May's job is to accompany these boys to court. To sit behind them and their state-appointed lawyers and take notes for Linda, to clarify anything the boys might not understand (though she herself barely understands any of it) and to help them work through whatever behavior plan, probation, or community service the court decides is most in order.

It is, save for those first few weeks after Ben died, when she was waiting to hear about Peter, the worst period of May's life. Even worse than watching Maggie die, worse than when her marriage was falling apart. At least Maggie could be at home. At least she and Ben were healthy and cared-for and both had homes to return to when it was all finished. These boys have nothing. They have lost their families to abuse and overdoses and violence and often for no reason at all—an unexpected illness, a car accident, and suddenly it was all gone. In the courts, they are treated with disdain. Judges sneer at them for their petty crimes, their low-level drug convictions, their convenience-store thefts, their gang affiliations. Some of the lawyers are kind, at least, but every one of them is like Linda: overworked, exhausted, understaffed, and with too much on their plates to give any of these boys even a fraction of the attention they actually need if they want to have a chance at breaking free from the cycle.

May wants to be different. She sees Peter in every one of them. Not the Peter from before, but the one from the CPS photo: guarded, ghostly, and most of all, frightened. And if she cannot get to Peter just yet, she wants to be for these boys what she cannot be for him. She wants to show them someone cares.

It doesn't seem to matter to most of them. When May offers kind words or gentle encouragement, she is met with contempt and distrust. When she offers advice, she is met with outright hatred. One boy goes so far as to spit in her face.

He's fifteen years old, this boy. His mother died of a drug overdose when he was twelve. He was the one to find the body. His lawyer is trying to use the trauma of this event as a defense for the string of violent fights the boy has gotten into at school, during the most recent of which he struck a classmate so hard he caused permanent damage to the other boy's eyesight. The spitting happens in the moments after the judge, unsympathetic, sentenced him to two years, when May is trying to comfort him.

"You can't save everyone," says Linda, when she finds May, sitting at her desk that evening, choking back tears and trying to hide the fact that she is doing so. "You have to try to focus on the ones you can."

May does not tell her that this is exactly what she has been trying to do. She does not admit it, because the full truth is that she is really only here to save one person—and she is even failing at that. She hasn't even gotten to see Peter's file again, though she has stayed late almost every night in an attempt to. But the bottom drawer to Linda's desk is always locked.

But at that thought, May is struck by an inspiration. She wipes her eyes, sits up straighter as Linda makes her way back to her own desk.

"Are there?" she says. "Cases where the kids are saved, I mean? You mentioned my first day that sometimes kids get good homes. There was that one boy, um... Peter, I think?"

"Hm?" Linda is already distracted again, a file open on her desk. "Oh. Peter. Oh, yeah. No, he's

quite alright. Doing very well.”

“Do you—do you ever see him?”

“Uh—yes. I mean, no. He’s mostly at school when I have time for visits, but I know his foster father quite well, he tells me he’s doing fine.”

It’s not enough. May presses.

“Do you think I could see his file?”

Linda frowns without tearing her eyes away from the paper in front of her.

“What for? I told you he’s fine.”

“I just... had a really hard day.”

Finally, Linda looks up. Her brow creases: a rare expression of sympathy.

She unlocks her bottom drawer, and hands May the file.

May, breathless, forces her hands not to tremble as she accepts it.

She makes it just three pages, and then she is trembling for a different reason.

May looks up at Linda. She says, “This can’t be right.”

Linda hums, a *go on* sound, though it’s clear she isn’t really listening.

“This says he tried to *stab* someone.”

“His roommate. Though I’m told they were both troublemakers.”

“That’s...” May can’t even form the words. It’s not just bizarre, it’s *incorrect*.

This is Peter. This is the kid who hid an injured bird in a box under his bed for a week because he was terrified his parents might put it down if they knew. The kid Ben had to hide from any time he was upset because he was so empathetic he couldn’t see even a hint of tears without bursting out crying. Who was so committed to what was right he stood up to his school bullies over and over and over, no matter how many times he got pummeled for it. Peter would never *stab* anyone. He couldn’t.

But May has no way to communicate this to Linda without giving herself away, so she just sits there, mouth working open and closed like a stranded fish, until she finally says, “Are you sure?”

“Well, he admitted to it, so yes. Pretty sure.”

“He *admitted it*?”

Now Linda’s sympathy is gone. She is starting to look impatient.

“I was trying to cheer you up,” she says. “But if you’re just going to sit there and question my report—”

“No!” May has to stop herself from clutching the file to her chest like a crazy person. “No, I’m sorry, he just... doesn’t look the type.”

“They never do until they do,” says Linda, as though this means something.

She returns to her work. May returns to the file. It seems Linda was right: it says so right in the page-long police report. Two boys were found scuffling with a knife. Peter admitted the knife was his, that he stole it from a drawer. He insisted on taking the blame, and was therefore removed from the halfway house where he had, unbeknownst to May, spent his entire summer.

The whole thing makes her want to cry. Peter was not with a family while she was waiting and learning and wheedling her way into CPS. He was in one of the awful group homes she now has to visit daily. He was getting into fights and getting into trouble and getting *arrested*.

“Who were you protecting, honey?” May murmurs, as she reaches the end of the report.

It’s the only explanation she can think of. But it seems she was the only one who did. Just like the report from the Arlingtons, it seems no one thought to ask Peter his side of the story. In the file, there is not a single quote from him. Not even an indication that anyone asked for one.

Feeling sick, May turns the page, dreading whatever is coming next.

But it is not bad. It is, actually, maybe... *good*.

There is a picture in the next section of the file. A picture of a tall, muscular, middle aged man, wearing a polo shirt and a charming smile. He is holding two girls, twins, one propped on each hip. They are smiling too.

Behind the photo is all the information CPS has on Steven Westcott. Wealthy. Philanthropic. Well-loved by his community. A seasoned foster parent who has sent six boys to college. He has taken Peter in, and enrolled him in Midtown.

Peter is safe. *He’s safe*.

May’s chest suddenly feels like a vacuum. Is it relief? Or is it something else?

He’s at his old school, May thinks. *He has his old friends. He has a foster family.*

Maybe it’s good. Maybe, just once, the universe let someone from the Parker family get lucky.

Maybe it’s *enough*.

It’s not the first time the thought has arisen. *Maybe Peter is better off without me*. Usually May tries to quell it, this thought, but now, for once, staring down at the file and chewing a ragged thumbnail, May lets it play out.

What is *really* going to happen if she finds him? Not only does she still have the restraining order, she has now willfully and knowingly committed fraud in order to infiltrate the very organization that took out that restraining order in the first place. The odds that she will ever be able to give Peter a good, normal life seem to be shrinking rather than growing the longer she searches for him—and yet May has not been able to bring herself to stop.

But should she? If he does have a good home, a good foster family, isn’t it possible she is doing more harm than good by trying to find her way back into his life? And if there is one thought May cannot stand, it is that she might harm Peter even more than he has already been harmed. He has been through enough.

It is with this thought heavy in the back of her mind that May finishes reading the file. When she is

done, she closes it, thinking, *Maybe this is it.*

But at the last second, just before she is about to return it to Linda, May stops. Flips the file open, and, when she is sure Linda isn't looking, jots down Peter's new address, the address of his school, as well as Steven Westcott's phone number.

She won't ruin anything else. That much she promises herself. If Peter really is safe and happy, then she will fade out of his life, just as he thinks she has already done. But she has learned her lesson this time, and she has learned it well: this time, May is going to be sure.

A week later she sees him, for the first time in almost a year—the first time since that last night at Ben's.

May is outside Midtown High, sunk low in the front seat of her station wagon and feeling creepier than she has ever felt in her life. She knows she is probably fine—she looks like any other mom, waiting in line to pick up her kid, and though the knowledge that she is *not* here to do just that makes May's stomach feel like it is full of shards of metal, she also knows she is protected by her femaleness, her middle-agedness, and the anonymity both of those things provide.

She is more afraid, really, that Peter will spot her. Afraid of what he will do if he does. If he hates her, she knows she deserves it. But that doesn't mean she could handle it.

She spots him as he is leaving the school. He is wrapped in more layers than are probably necessary—it's been an unseasonably warm November—including a turtleneck that is too big for him, and whose sleeves cover his hands. He's got his shoulders drawn up around his ears, and he seems to be shuffling more than walking, as though he doesn't want to lift his feet. But there is no mistaking that it's *him*. May would know that mop of brown hair anywhere.

For one wild moment, she forgets. She forgets that she has a restraining order against her. She forgets that she is living a lie, that she doesn't have the same hair or even the same name, and that if anyone discovered these things she wouldn't just lose him all over again: she would almost certainly be thrown in jail. She forgets, too, that Peter could very well despise her, the same way the boys in court do. In that moment, all she wants to do is burst out of the car and run to him, sweep him into her arms and tell him that she is sorry, so sorry, and that he doesn't have to look so lost anymore because she is here, she is *right here*.

Her hand is on the door. May tugs on the handle—but before she can move, someone beats her to it. A dark-haired boy in a Star Wars t-shirt comes puffing out of the crowd of leaving students toward Peter, and claps him on the shoulder. Peter seems to flinch at first—but as soon as he sees who it is, he relaxes. Lowers his shoulders and lifts his gaze to grin at his friend. A bright, toothy grin. The one May remembers—almost. It is a little softer, maybe. A little more guarded. But it is there, and it is not for her. It is for his friend Ned, who May remembers from that birthday party all those months ago. Peter has friends here. He has remnants of the life he had with Ben. Remnants he might not keep if May were to interfere.

Closing the door feels it takes an enormous effort. It feels like it weighs a thousand pounds.

May does it anyway. And then, swallowing like her throat is full of glass, May goes home.

Nothing Will Save It Now

“Hey Margaret, you have a minute?”

May looks up from her desk, where she has been buried in court cases for the last four hours. Linda is standing over her, clutching yet another file, and when May sees it her stomach shrivels—because *no*, she does not have a minute, which Linda knows, just as she knows that whatever she is about to ask will take a lot longer than that.

May has been with CPS for nearly six months now, and never once has she been handed a case that only takes a *minute*.

It’s been four months since that day at the school. Four months, and May has spent nearly every waking moment of it in this basement office or at the courthouse, crouched over her desk in the corner or sitting in a courtroom, just behind some young man and watching while the course of his life is dictated down to him by a judge, or his social worker, or whoever holds it in their hands at the current moment. Her back aches constantly from all the sitting, straining, staring, but still she comes, every day, and she sits and strains and stares some more.

Why did May stay? Why hasn’t she dropped the ruse, returned her sister’s identity to the box where it belongs, resumed her work as a nurse? She has given Peter up—about that, she is adamant with herself. It’s better. It is the only way he will have a life. And, knowing that, shouldn’t she give herself some semblance of a life as well? Because this—spending all her time in this dank place, surrounded by near-unending hopelessness—can hardly be called a life.

But May hasn’t left.

Maybe it’s because of the boys. Often, over the last four months, she has told herself she will quit, usually after a particularly difficult case is over. And then while she is working, another case comes along. And she tells herself that will be the last. And then again, another. And on and on.

She sees Peter in every one of their faces. In each case, she sees what might have become of him.

Maybe that’s why she doesn’t leave.

Or maybe it’s because of Peter himself. She tells herself she has let him go, but nearly every week since she drove away from the school that day in November has found her, on a Friday evening, making some excuse to stay late, after Linda has left. And nearly every Friday she has gone to the drawer where Linda keeps her files, jimmied it open, and spent a while staring at Peter’s, which has remained almost unchanged since that first time she looked at it. She reads the notes from the halfway house. She reads the reports on Skip Westcott. She sits on the floor and stares at the photo taken at the police station the night Ben died. And then she packs everything away and goes home, unsure if she feels closer to him because of this ritual, or further away.

Her uncertainty doesn’t matter: the outcome is the same. May is still at CPS. She is still, to everyone who knows her there, Margaret Esposito.

It’s not so much that she *doesn’t* leave as it is she *can’t*.

Which is why, when Linda tosses the file onto her desk that chilly day in March, almost exactly a year after Ben’s death, May is right where she always is, ready to catch it.

May recognizes the file immediately—of course she does, because she has spent every Friday

evening for the last quarter of a year staring at it—and feels a swelling panic (*Caught!* she thinks) which she immediately swallows down.

“Peter Parker?” she says, looking up at Linda. “I thought he was doing fine?”

Linda looks distinctly uncomfortable, like she is experiencing a mild indigestion. She says, “Oh yes, no, he’s fine. It’s nothing major, Mr. Westcott is doing a wonderful job with him. It’s just his, ah, his grades are slipping a bit, and it seems he may have ditched class once or twice. Typical teenage stuff—mild, compared to what you’re used to—but I wonder if you’d mind having a look? I’d do it myself but I have this Jemison case just swamping me and... I’d really appreciate it.”

May’s panic disappears, crowded out by a larger, warmer swell of something that May hasn’t felt in so long it takes her a moment to recognize it as excitement. But as quickly as it crests—an enthusiastic *Yes!* ready on her tongue—the excitement dies.

She can’t say yes. Of course she can’t say yes, because if she walks right into Peter’s living room, no amount of hair dye or fake IDs are going to prevent him from recognizing her. And the last thing Peter knew about May was that she said she would pick him up from the police station and then never appeared. He could very well hate her. He *should* hate her, and while May knows she deserves it, the entire point of everything she has done this past year has been to *spare* Peter more pain. As much as it hurts, she cannot see him.

“I...,” she says, “I don’t know, Linda, I’m pretty—”

“Please,” Linda says. The tremor in her hand is more visible now. It always gets worse when she is stressed—or more stressed than usual, anyway. “I really need you to have my back on this one. It’s the easiest case you’re going to get all year. Mr. Westcott is lovely. His girls are lovely. I just—I need you on this.”

As she speaks, May realizes there is something else behind her voice—some edge that, for some reason May cannot place, sounds like desperation. And that, more than anything, makes her close her mouth.

It’s not just that she wants to be close to Peter—or, so she tells herself, firmly, while she holds Linda’s gaze. If there *is* something behind Linda’s barely-concealed pleading, then maybe this is exactly the moment she has been waiting for. The real reason she has stayed with CPS all this time. After all, what’s the point of being close to Peter if she isn’t using that closeness to ensure he really is safe? She can do this. She has been lying, consistently and successfully, about everything, for the better part of a year. What is this besides another layer to those lies?

“I’ll see what I can do,” says May, and she opens the file.

The expression on the man’s face folds in on itself when he sees May, but it’s a momentary collapse—fast enough that May cannot read it before it becomes something else.

Steven Westcott is more than a head taller than her, wearing a shirt that is too tight for his bulky, muscular frame, and carrying a gym bag over his shoulder, as though he was on his way out the door when May knocked on it. And maybe that’s why she saw the weird interim on his face, and feels a slight nervousness when he looks her up and down: he is annoyed she is here.

When he speaks, however, his voice is mild.

“Hello,” he says, “how can I help you?”

May recovers, shoves the nervousness down. It’s just another layer, she reminds herself, and she taps the badge on her chest.

“CPS,” she says. “I’m Margaret Esposito, I work with Linda. Is Peter home?”

Another shift in Westcott’s face—different, this time, but gone just as quickly. May almost misses it, but she doesn’t miss the way Westcott shifts slightly, so more of his body is blocking the door, rather than inviting her in.

“Ah—no,” he says. “It’s a school day. Sorry—Margaret, did you say it was? I wasn’t aware we had a scheduled visit.”

“We don’t.” May pastes on the phony-but-convincing smile she uses in all her home visits. “I was just in the neighborhood and I thought I’d drop by. May I come in?”

Now May is sure she sees it: a furrowing of the brow. Westcott does not want to let her in.

A throbbing anxiety such as she has not felt since she first read Peter’s file—and learned about the halfway house—appears in May’s chest, like she’s just been punched in the heart. Why doesn’t he want to let her in? What’s hiding behind the door jamb and the stretch of his broad shoulders? Has she made the same mistake again in leaving Peter alone?

But before May can get a hold on any of this, Westcott steps aside, sweeping an arm wide to invite May inside.

May steps across the threshold, and the punched-in-the-chest sensation disappears. Beyond the doorway is—an apartment. Just an apartment. There is a kitchen to the left of the entrance, filled with state-of-the-art appliances, a small dining room, and a living room to the right, cozily cluttered with discarded games and toys and stuffed animals. The entranceway continues on through all of this to the end of the apartment, where it curves off into a second hallway. It’s mid-sized but probably crazily expensive, considering the neighborhood, and so much nicer than any apartment May has been in in the last six months—including her own—that her first reaction is to come to a dead halt on the foyer, where she just stares for a long moment until Westcott shuts the door behind her, snapping her out of it.

“I’m sorry it’s so messy,” he says, gesturing to the toys, and to the sink, where a rack of hand-washed dishes is drying. “If I’d known we were having visitors I would have asked the girls to put their things away before school.”

May struggles for a moment to rein herself in, to hoist the smile back onto her face. *He was worried about the mess*, she tells herself. *It was only in your head.*

Still, she feels like she did back in November, that day she saw Peter outside his school. The proof of her own inadequacy is right in front of her, and yet there is still a part of her that wishes she could tear down the facade, reach through the metaphorical car door, and pull Peter out of this world and back into hers.

It’s selfish. She swallows it down.

“It’s no problem,” she says to Westcott, who is watching her expectantly. “You have a lovely home, Mr. Westcott.”

“Skip. Everyone calls me Skip.”

May barely stops herself from making a sarcastic comment, but she manages. Westcott drops his bag in the foyer and walks around her, into the kitchen.

“So, do you want to have a look around, or...?”

He gestures toward the fridge, raises his eyebrows, and May finally realizes that she must look half stupid, standing in the doorway and gaping silently at his apartment. She clears her throat, lifts her clipboard to balance on her hip, and takes another step into the apartment, shaking her head.

“Sorry,” she says. “Sorry, I’m a little out of sorts. We’ve been swamped lately, that’s why Linda had me drop by. Um, it’s not a home inspection Mr.—Skip. I’m actually just here to talk about Peter.”

Westcott nods. It’s paternal and understanding. Exactly the sort of demeanor May should be glad to see in the man who is taking care of Ben’s nephew, and yet when she sees it she feels only a renewed surge of longing.

May thinks, *God, I really shouldn’t be here.*

But when he offers her a seat at the dining room table, she takes it.

“I take it this is about Peter’s grades?” says Westcott, taking the seat across from her. “I know his last progress report wasn’t up to his usual standard, but he’s already spoken to his principal and they’ve got him in tutoring—he’s already getting back to where he needs to be.”

“That’s... good.” Why is May almost disappointed to hear it? Shouldn’t she want him to succeed, regardless of where he’s living? “Any idea what caused the lapse?”

Westcott shrugs—innocently, not dismissively, and yet May bristles when she sees it. What is it about this man that is rubbing her the wrong way? *Jealousy*, she tells herself, and has to swallow hard to force it away. No right. She has no right.

“It’s a transition, Ms. Esposito. A new home, a mainstream school... after Peter’s background, it was bound to catch up with him eventually.”

“He was doing great until December of last year, though. He had been with you four months at that time.”

Something in Westcott’s smile becomes fixed.

“I see you’re pretty familiar with Peter’s case.”

“It’s my job to be familiar.”

“Then you know as well as anyone that it’s not exactly out of character for him to have these *lapses*, as you called them. You read about the halfway house?”

It’s not jealousy tightening May’s throat anymore.

“My understanding was that was an isolated incident,” she says.

“I wish I could say it was, Miss Esposito, but I’m afraid Peter is prone to—ah—*outbursts*. Not that I blame him, you understand. But it’s something we’ve been working on since he came to live with me. He has trouble maintaining relationships, bad boundaries—consequences of what happened

with his uncle, I think. You heard about the fight he had with his friend, Ned?”

“Ned?”

May knew about the fight: it’s in the file. But the other boy’s name wasn’t mentioned, and when Westcott says it, she can’t believe it. Ned has been Peter’s best friend since they were both little boys; he’s almost as sweet and gentle as Peter is. What in the world could they have fought about badly enough Peter was disciplined for it?

She fights her face back to neutral. Westcott is frowning at her.

“You’re new at this, aren’t you, Miss Esposito?”

May bristles. “I’ve been with CPS for nearly six months.”

“That’s new.” Westcott leans toward her, across the table. “Look,” he says, “I’m not saying Peter is a bad kid, but whatever idea you have about him, it’s clear you don’t know him. It doesn’t matter how smart a kid is, or how good he was as a child. These kids are the things that happen to them, and the fact is, Peter’s had some terrible things happen. He’s responding to them, and I’m doing my best to respond to him. This? With school? It’s a hiccup.”

Under the table, May’s grasp on her clipboard has gone white-knuckled. But she has no rejoinder. For the first time, the prospect niggles into the back of her brain: maybe Peter *has* changed.

But what she says is, “I’d like to see his room.”

“Why?” says Westcott.

He does not sound so understanding anymore.

“Just to look around. Make sure there’s nothing in his environment that’s precipitating the behavior problem. You understand, don’t you Mr. Westcott?”

Now there’s no mistaking it. Westcott’s smile has gone flat. But he gets to his feet anyway, holds a hand out toward the hallway. May stands too, and follows him to the bedrooms.

Peter’s room is... plain. Plainer than May would have expected, considering his childhood bedroom is right down the hall from her own room, still preserved in the state in which he left it: that is, a clutter of old electronics, toys, comic books, and any other knick-knack Peter found interesting. He was practically a hoarder, back when he lived with Ben, and yet the boy who lives in this room clearly has none of the same propensity. The walls are bare. The bed, neatly made, doesn’t even have a pattern on the comforter. The only accoutrements, in fact, are on the desk, upon which rests a stack of textbooks and a single framed photo: Peter and a pair of twin girls, smiling at the camera as they make pancakes together over a messy stove.

The Peter in the picture looks like he did outside the school that day in November: a little tired, maybe, but whole.

May has to force herself not to let her gaze linger. Westcott is watching her.

She looks around the room again, once, and thinks, *Maybe he really has changed.*

May is just processing this, clearing her throat and preparing to take her leave, when, down the hall away from the bedrooms, a phone rings.

Wescott's careful stare turns expectant. But the ringing phone has presented May with an opportunity.

"Go ahead," she says. "I'll only be another minute."

Westcott's jaw seems to tighten, but he is in no position to object. With a short nod, he turns away and heads down the hallway.

As soon as his footsteps fade, May fumbles in her purse, hasty, until she finds a business card. She pulls it out and bends over the desk, toward the picture of Peter and the twins, to write her cell phone number on the back.

Maybe Peter has changed. He's a teenager; he's gone through hell—change is exactly what anyone would do under those circumstances. But some part deep in her being rebels at the idea. Just as some part deep in her being is telling her something is off here, something she won't be able to put her finger on until she hears it straight from the source.

Peter will probably hate her when he sees her. Maybe he will even report her, turn her in, throw her out of his life the way she deserves to be thrown out—but at least then she will know for sure.

She stuffs the business card under Peter's pillow, and she leaves his room.

May spends the next week staring at her cell phone, waiting for it to light up with an unfamiliar number. She has a plan in place: when he calls, she will invite him to meet her after school—somewhere innocuous but private—and when he arrived, she can come clean. Tell him everything. Make sure he is safe. Whatever happens afterward is up to him.

But Peter never calls.

And two weeks after that, he is gone.

"What the hell do you mean we *aren't going to look for him?*"

May is standing over Linda's desk while the latter gazes up at her evenly with tired, red-rimmed eyes. The sensation in May's body has surpassed *punched in the chest*. She feels like someone has reached right through her. Like she has been torn in half, and nothing will ever bring the pieces back together.

Peter is gone. Ran off in the middle of the night. *Gone*.

Linda sighs.

"I mean exactly what I said. We don't have any money to search for him. That's up to the police."

"The police aren't going to do shit and you know it. They think he's a truant, they think he's a lost cause—"

“Margaret, calm down.”

“—but he’s fourteen years old! He can’t be on his own, this is New York, for fuck’s sake, he’s—”

“Margaret.”

“Stop saying my name! How the hell are you so calm about this?”

“Because it happens all the time, Margaret. Why *aren’t* you calm?”

May is on the verge of hysterical tears. She turns away from the desk to hide them, runs a hand through her tangled hair.

“There was something wrong with Westcott,” she says.

Another sigh.

“Margaret...”

May whirls back.

“There was *something wrong with him*, goddammit! He was hiding something when I went over, he didn’t want me there—I never should have—”

“Steven Westcott,” says Linda, her voice going cold, “is one of the only foster parents in the world who takes in boys like Peter without a word of complaint. Enthusiastically, in fact.”

“And why is that?” May counters. “Have you ever fucking thought *why that is*, Linda? Or were you just glad not to be *burdened* by another kid you never bothered to ask?”

Abruptly, Linda gets to her feet.

“I understand you’re upset,” she says, “but don’t you *dare* accuse me of not caring, Margaret. Why the hell do you think I’ve spent the last ten years of my life in this goddamn basement?”

May has never heard Linda swear before. In any other situation, it might have knocked her out of her own anger. But this is Peter.

“He’s fourteen,” she says again. “He’s all alone, and no one is looking for him. *Please*, you have to let me—”

“There is no money,” says Linda. “As sad as that is, it doesn’t change the reality. And the reality is, Peter made his choice. Now you make yours: help the kids who want to be helped, or pack your things.”

She gestures toward the door, but May doesn’t look toward it. As useless as she feels—and May has never felt more useless, not even the night Ben died—she will be even more so if she leaves CPS.

When May says nothing, Linda lowers her arm.

“I’m sorry, Margaret,” she says. “I really am. But there’s nothing you can do except get back to work.”

Linda sits. Lowers her head to the papers on her desk.

And May returns to her own.

She pulls Peter's file out of her bottom drawer, and she does as Linda said: she gets back to work.

"I already spoke to the police," says Principal Morita, opening the door to his office. "And another social worker came by as well. I wish I could give you more, Ms. Esposito, but I'm afraid I don't have any idea where Peter went."

May enters the office, takes the seat across the desk while Morita sits behind it, and pulls her notebook out of her purse.

"I read your statement," she says, thumbing the notebook open to the earliest blank page, which is almost at the back; it's been three weeks since Peter disappeared, and the notebook is already full of dead ends. "I'm just trying to get a better idea of *why* he would have run."

"Did you ever meet him?"

May bites the inside of her lip hard enough she tastes blood, and then bites a little harder, waiting for her self-control has returned. It's the same refrain she has gotten from everyone she has spoken to, from Peter's teachers to the caregivers at the halfway house to Westcott himself. They all act like it's a given that he has disappeared, but when May asks them to tell her about him—about *Peter*, not about what is written in his file—none of them have been able to give her a satisfactory answer. Because none of them knew him. It has been three weeks of building upon this terrible revelation: she left him alone because she thought he was safe, cared for, loved. But in reality none of them were even looking at him. She left him for months in this sea of indifferent faces.

She is not going to abandon him again.

"I'm not interested in his past," says May tersely. "I'm more concerned with where he is presently."

Morita, to his credit, has the good grace to appear cowed.

"Of course," he says, "I'm sorry. I don't mean to come off as callous, and of course I hope you find him... it's just, Mr. Parker was a tough case. He was as smart as any kid I've ever seen come through this school, but he... how do I put this? He had a hard time connecting. A propensity for pushing people away. His friend Ned, for example. That kid stuck his neck out for Peter at every turn—he practically begged me to admit him, and then put up with all the rumors that come with being a friend to someone with Peter's reputation, and Peter still lashed out at him. I don't think he knew how not to."

Morita's voice is sympathetic. It's more than she's gotten from any of the other adults, and May finds her own hard exterior buckling at this first small sign of commiseration. Her own voice is almost plaintive when she says,

"I know he had a hard time in foster care. But I know... I've also seen the evidence of what he was like before his uncle died and I just... I can't believe he would have been the kind of kid to fight like that, especially with his friend."

"I have the security footage, if you'd like to see it. We keep records of any altercations that occur

on school grounds.”

May holds herself very still in her seat while Morita pulls the file up on his computer. The slightly-grainy, distant image of Peter, sitting across from Ned at the cafeteria table, is the closest she has gotten to seeing the real thing since November. The video has no sound, but it doesn’t really need it: about thirty seconds into the clip, Peter springs to his feet, his tray skittering across the table so hard it almost hits Ned. It’s clear Peter is shouting at him; Ned shrinks in his own seat, clearly at a loss. It only lasts a moment, and then Peter is seizing his backpack from the seat beside him, storming out of the cafeteria.

May opens her mouth, about to ask if that’s it—because from the look of things all Peter did was lose his temper, shout a bit, yet the file makes it sound like he tried to beat Ned into the ground—but before she can, the clip rolls into another. This time the computer shows a scaled-down version of the very room in which May herself now sits, taken from a security camera which, glancing up, she sees still resides in the corner above and to the left of Morita’s desk. Except it is not May sitting in the chair across from Morita on the computer screen: it is Peter, and the moment May sees him her whole chest closes in on itself.

The Peter in this video is *not* the Peter she knows. He is dressed in too many layers, like he was in November, but in the video he has changed: all of the clothes hang off him like there is nothing beneath the fabric but bone. And yet despite the looseness of his clothes, she can see that Peter himself is tight, so curled and hunched in his chair he looks like he is trying to make himself disappear. His hands are curled into fists, and his knee is shaking so hard it’s almost a blur.

The Morita in the video is impassive, gazing at Peter calmly, as if he doesn’t notice the distress. As if he were gazing at an overly-rambunctious dog in need of discipline instead of a human boy.

Unlike the cafeteria clip, this video has sound. On-screen Morita says, sternly, “*Mr. Parker, look at me.*”

Peter raises his head, and his face is just as tight as his body language, and as hollow as his too-large sweatshirt.

“*It was just an argument,*” he says. “*I tried to tell Ned I was sorry.*”

Real-life Morita raises an eyebrow at May, as though to say *I told you so*. But it barely registers. May’s whole focus is on Peter, and on her own heart, which has just punched itself into her throat. It is on the way Peter’s voice breaks when Morita threatens to kick him out of school. On the way Peter’s eyes slide slightly out of focus when he says, “*I think... I think I need help.*”

Her heart ratchets higher. Her stomach bottoms out.

Something is terribly, terribly wrong.

Morita pauses the video.

“We got him in tutoring,” he says, and his voice sounds claggy, distant. May has to focus all her intention just to get herself to hear it. “He antagonized his first tutor so badly she quit after just one day, and he ditched class a few times after that. But then I thought he was getting better. His grades were going up, his attendance was improving... and then one day he was gone. It was a real blow to everyone, but I think especially to Mr. Westcott. His voice when he called to tell me Peter had run away was—”

“He asked you for help.”

Morita stops talking abruptly, probably more stunned by May's voice, hoarse and wrecked, than by what she has said.

"I'm sorry?"

"He... he asked you for *help*. Look at him. Look at his face, the way he's holding himself. Something was *wrong*, and you put him in *tutoring*?"

At last, Morita looks nonplussed. He fidgets slightly, says, "Miss Esposito, you just saw him admit to the fight, he—"

"He shouted," says May. "He shouted at his friend, that's not a fight, that's an outburst. After everything he went through, you don't think he was entitled to an outburst?"

"I'm saying, Peter clearly knew he had a problem with self-control—"

"That's not what he meant. That's not—he asked you for help, he—oh, shit."

May stands abruptly. She stuffs her notebook back into her purse. Morita stares up at her with a half-open mouth, and there is something dawning in his expression, some far-too-slow comprehension, but May cannot stay to see it arrive. Something else is rising in her, something far more urgent and difficult to ignore.

She barely makes it into the stall of the closest girls' room before the vomit escapes. She's hardly eaten in the last few weeks, but what she has leaves her now, has her heaving over the toilet until her stomach is lurching dryly, until she is empty, empty, empty.

I need help, he says, quiet and phantasmal and not here, not here, not here.

I need help, I need help, I need help.

What has she done?

"I'm begging you, just let me look into Westcott. Let me talk to his other kids, his ex wife, anything. Just give me their information, what harm can it do?"

"You're coming unhinged, Margaret. I'm not handing out confidential information just so you can pursue your made-up vendetta. I'm warning you, drop it. It's done."

What can she do? If she tells the truth—puts up posters, goes on the news, begs for him to come home—she will go to jail, and Peter, if he emerges, might go somewhere even worse.

So May looks alone. She talks to everyone, and talks to them again, and again, until they stop answering, stop returning her calls. Until even the police won't pick up. And when she has done all that, she takes to trawling the streets of Queens, his picture in her back pocket, asking anyone who will stop if they've seen a scrawny, sad-eyed boy, wandering alone.

Of course it gets her nowhere. This is New York City. Everyone is alone.

Spring passes in a blur. Summer starts the same way. In a distant world, the Avengers are fighting, and new superheroes are popping up all over the city, swinging around saving the world. But May's world has shattered already. Nothing will save it now.

And yet, in spite of the irreparable damage May herself has wrought, a superhero appears.

"Why the fuck does Tony Stark want to know about Peter?"

"Language," Linda hisses. She is whispering on her end of the phone, clearly trying not to be overheard. "And quite frankly, Margaret, not that it's any of your business, but he's interested in a philanthropic opportunity, and even considering your attitude these last few months, I wouldn't expect you to turn your nose up at any sort of donation, especially if it involves Peter. Don't pretend you don't have his file. I know you snatched it from my desk, don't think I don't."

May, sitting in her car outside Westcott's apartment building, where she spends many of her lunch breaks, scoffs.

"Really, Linda? You think this is going to be a good opportunity for *Peter*? It's going to be a real feat helping him since no one gives a shit where he is. Or is that what you think Stark is there for? You think he actually gives a damn about who Westcott is under all the money and the accolades? Because he'd be the first."

"Whatever your *thing* with Steven is—"

"My *thing* with Steven is he's a predator. And I'm supposed to hand him his prey because Tony Stark bought the innocent dad routine? Apparently being a billionaire doesn't prevent you from being a blind idiot. Which is what anyone who trusts Steven Westcott is."

A brief pause.

"Margaret," says Linda, and though her voice is still so low it is barely audible, it has gone deadly, "I put up with a lot from you. I don't know what your vendetta with Steven is, but I've let you ride it out, turned a blind eye as much as I possibly could. But if you in any way prevent these kids from getting this money, I swear to God I won't just get you fired. I'll have your goddamn head."

Linda doesn't threaten. She doesn't swear. And so May knows she is serious.

She gives her the file. Circles the block once and then returns to her spot outside the apartment, where she sits until, just a few minutes later, Tony Stark appears in the flesh, holding her file in one

hand, walking like he's being followed.

Stark throws the file in his front seat and drives away. And for the first time in months and months, something besides desperation sparks in May's mind.

It is almost like hope.

It takes less than an hour for Linda to acquiesce about the fliers. Apparently all it takes to get CPS moving on a missing person is the intervention of a billionaire. If only May had known.

Getting Tony Stark's number takes a little longer. Linda is—perhaps understandably—concerned about what May will say about Westcott. In the end, May is forced to take a leaf out of Linda's own book: she threatens Linda's job.

“You think Stark's philanthropic venture is going to find its feet when I let management know you handed out confidential information just because he asked you? And that's just your bosses. How suspicious will that look to the public, Linda? You think they'll see it as a nice gesture? Or will they just wonder what you're covering up?”

It's fair to say her relationship with Linda crumbles after that.

Her relationship with Tony Stark, however, is just beginning.

It's not a great beginning.

Never mind that May is too exhausted and wrung-out to so much as notice they surreal turn her life has taken to find her standing in her own neighborhood, scolding a billionaire superhero like he is one of her truancy cases. The real highlight of the encounter is finding out that Tony Stark, like the rest of the world, doesn't actually give a shit about Peter. He's here looking for Spider-Man.

She suspected this, of course. It's why she met him here, why she's chosen this part of Queens to start placing the fliers she was finally able to make because of Stark's intervention. But the realization that she was correct still feels like a twist of the knife. Even still, no one is looking for him. Even still, no one *believes* in him. Not even the so-called superhero in front of her.

To Stark's small credit, he seems almost as frustrated as May feels, even if his frustration is on Spider-Man's behalf rather than Peter's. May almost wishes she could find it endearing, but she is so sick of it. She is so sick of everyone acting like Peter is lesser, and that's exactly what he is to Tony Stark: less than Spider-Man. Worse than that: he seems to think Peter is somehow a *danger*. As if even superheroes can't handle teenage runaways.

So May isn't exactly kind. But to be fair, neither is Stark. Their brief encounter ends in mutual frustration: the only small comfort, for May anyway, is that Stark seems to think Peter knows Spider-Man, which must mean he is at least alive. May hasn't allowed herself to consider the alternative, not on purpose anyway, but this small affirmation means something. It means

something big.

And after Stark drives away, that *something* gets even bigger.

She is hanging missing posters on the plywood covering the blown-apart bodega when someone behind her shouts, “Hey!”

May turns around to see a thick-set bearded man jogging toward her, his brow furrowed. He draws level with her, halts.

“Hey,” he says again, “no fliers. you wanna chase off all my customers? If this place looks like poster board no one is gonna think I’ll ever open up again.”

On a different day May might argue. But the encounter with Stark has left her jittery with potential; she doesn’t want to argue, she just wants to get as many fliers up as she can.

When she raises a hand to tear the flier down, however, the bearded man slaps a hand over it.

May looks at him, startled. But he is not looking at her. He is staring at the picture of Peter, his brows drawn together, his mouth half open. Her heart starts to pound, though she cannot immediately say why. Just when she is about to ask, the man tears his eyes away from the poster. They land on her.

“Peter’s *missing*?”

May’s breath bursts out of her in a disbelieving huff.

“You know him?”

“He’s from the neighborhood.” The man’s voice is shaking. “He works for me. I thought he stopped coming by because of what happened to the bodega—what the hell happened? Is his uncle okay?”

May is reeling. The words that are coming out of this man’s mouth are so far off from anything she would have expected she is having trouble understanding them.

“You... what are you talking about?”

“*Peter*. How the hell did he go missing?”

“You... you said he *works* for you.”

“He does. He did. He stopped coming after the Spider-Man thing but I thought it was because he saw—”

“Wait.” It’s May’s turn to put a hand up. “Wait, just—I thought the accident with Spider-Man was a few weeks ago.”

“It was. I was gonna track the little twerp down myself if I didn’t hear from him soon, I just thought he was taking some time with his uncle. God, Ben must be losing his mind, I’ve gotta—”

“Sir. Mister—?”

“Delmar.”

“Mr. Delmar, Peter has been missing for six months.”

Mr. Delmar takes a step back, seemingly involuntarily. Now he is looking at May as though *she* is the crazy one.

“No.” He shakes his head, hard. “No, you don’t—he was in here two weeks ago.”

“He’s been missing for six months,” May repeats, “and his uncle died over a year ago.”

Now the color rushes out of Mr. Delmar’s face. His throat works. It is a moment before he speaks again. When he does, he says,

“I think you’d better come inside.”

Twenty minutes later, May is shivering in the back room of the bodega, which is the only part of the store that wasn’t destroyed in the Spider-Man fight. She is seated across from Mr. Delmar at a little card table he has set up as a temporary work space. Above her head a TV is playing silently, flashing lights of all colors across Mr. Delmar’s skin.

May isn’t shaking because it’s cold—it’s nearly September, and the late-August heat is still going strong. She’s shaking because of what Mr. Delmar has just told her.

Peter is alive. He has been working here—right here, in this bodega—for months. She feels—she doesn’t know how she feels. It should feel like good news, *is* good news, but it has been so long since she has had anything of the sort it’s almost like her body doesn’t know how to react except to shake. She couldn’t name a single emotion she is having if Tony Stark reappeared and offered her his fortune to do so.

Mr. Delmar, on the other hand, is having a very recognizable emotion. That emotion is shame. He has his head in his hands and is staring at the plastic tabletop.

“I should have pushed,” he says. “I would always give him a hard time about his uncle, but I never really pushed it. I thought he just didn’t want Ben to worry, you know? Like maybe he was saving up to surprise him. He never said anything about...”

Mr. Delmar looks up, his face a twisted mix of confusion and contrition. She forces herself to speak.

“Did he say anything about where he was staying? Anything at all?”

Mr. Delmar shakes his head slowly. “He was private. I thought he was embarrassed or something, like maybe he and his uncle had hit on hard times, or... I didn’t want to make it worse by bringing it up. I shoulda brought it up.”

“How did he... did he look okay?”

Mr. Delmar shrugs. “He looked rough, sometimes. Always wore the same clothes. Skinny. But I’ve been there with my own kids, back when we first came to New York. I just thought they were low on funds, you know? I never thought... I should have given him more, I should have—”

“You were helping him,” says May. “That’s more than anyone else can say.”

Peter is alive. She rolls it around in her brain again, tries to make it sound real. Peter is alive.

“How can he have been gone *six months*?” says Mr. Delmar. “Why hasn’t anyone found him?”

May can’t answer. She knows the words; she just can’t say them.

What she says instead is:

“Mr. Delmar, what was he like?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean... was he...?” May takes a deep breath. “Some of the other people... some of the people I’ve talked to seem to think he was... hard.”

Now Mr. Delmar frowns. “Hard?”

“Rough around the edges.” He frowns more deeply. May swallows. “Mr. Delmar, Peter’s former caretakers thought he was trouble. A delinquent. Violent.”

Mr. Delmar makes an incredulous noise. It takes May a moment to recognize it as laughter.

“*Peter*?” he says. “Who said that? That kid was as good as they come. Quiet, nice to everyone... He was the best worker I had, always on time, always ready to go... the worst he ever did was give Alejandro shit, but only because I made him do it. It was practically in his job description. Who said that about him?”

And it’s as though a wall she didn’t even know she had built has suddenly come crumbling down, and all the emotions that were bricked up behind it come rushing out. It’s all May can do not to slip out of her chair; she has to cover her face with her hands.

“Everyone said... everyone... I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

She is sorry. She is so, so sorry. Of course Peter is good; of course he is kind. The fact that she allowed herself to feel even a sliver of doubt is more shameful than she can express; the fact that she has finally, finally met someone who saw him for what he was and not what he had done makes her so relieved she could cry.

But she doesn’t. She lowers her hands to see Mr. Delmar, staring at her with unconcealed worry, and she forces herself to be calm.

“I need to find him,” she says. “He’s not in any trouble. We just... I just need to know he’s okay.”

Now Mr. Delmar leans back. He folds his arms over his chest.

“I know that kid. Maybe I didn’t know everything that was going on with him, but I spent almost every morning with him for four months, so I know him. And if he ran, it was because he was running from something. And if he didn’t tell me about it, it was because he thought I would send him back if he did. So you tell me: why should I do that? You just told me everyone thinks he’s a good-for-nothing, why would I break his trust, send him back to that?”

May digs into her purse. She pulls out her notebook, rips out a piece of paper, writes her number on it. Then she slides it across the table to Mr. Delmar.

“That’s my number,” she says. “My personal number. If he comes back, you call me. Not CPS, not the number on the poster. Me. And I promise you, I *promise*, I will never send him back to those people.”

Mr. Delmar frowns again. He looks like he is about to say something further, but before he can his eyes slide away from May's face and upward, to the TV mounted on the wall above her head. May turns around, follows his gaze.

It's a news bulletin—another superhero-related disaster. Iron Man is there—a busy day for Tony Stark, apparently—and so is Spider-Man. From the looks of it, something has torn the Staten Island Ferry in half.

It is a mark of how desperately exhausting these last months have been that the sight of a massive boat being ripped apart and then welded back together barely stirs a murmur of emotion in May. She merely glances at it, then returns her attention to Mr. Delmar, mouth open, ready to resume her pleas, but Mr. Delmar's eyes are still on the news, and for the first time since she met him, he seems angry.

"Piranhas," he says. "Of course they'll blame it on Spider-Man. You wanna talk unfair labels? They act like that kid is the next Justin Hammer, like he's some super villain in the making. You know what he is? A neighborhood hero. The only one of these super dupers who actually gives a crap about the guys like me. You know he saved my life? Jumped right into a burning building to pull me out. And still they do anything they can to crucify him."

Slowly, May turns back to the television. They have cut away from the ferry to a grainy still photo of Spider-Man. May has seen him before, of course she has, but he appeared right around the same time Peter *dis* appeared, and because of that she has not had much energy to spend on news of new vigilantes. Now, for the first time, she looks at him, sees that he is smaller than she would have thought. Skinnier.

Before the thought goes any further, Mr. Delmar interrupts it.

"I'll call you," he says, taking her number as May once again turns to face him. "But you gotta swear you'll do right by him."

May does.

Less than a week later, May's phone rings in the middle of the night.

It's habit, now, for her heart to start hammering when these late-night calls come, long before her brain can catch up. She doesn't even check the caller ID before answering. Her first thought is that it must be Mr. Delmar.

"Hello?"

On the other end, for a moment, silence.

"Hello? Is someone there?"

Now, a faint sound, a snuffling. May goes hurtling back in time, back to the night Ben died. Her throat begins to constrict.

"Who is this?" she whispers.

At last, an answer. “It’s Linda.”

“Linda?” May is getting out of bed, searching for her shoes. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I...” Linda takes a few stuttering breaths. She is crying. “They found Peter. Peter Parker.”

May almost sinks to her knees. She catches herself on the bedside table at the last second; the box holding Ben’s ashes shudders, naked in the moonlight.

“Is he—?”

“He’s alive. I don’t... nobody knows what happened. We just got the call he’s at the hospital, but...”

“But what? But *what*? *Goddammit* Linda, *talk!*”

Linda’s voice is small. Smaller than May has ever heard it.

“Margaret,” she says, “I think you’d better turn on the news.”

May has no idea how she moves so quickly into the living room, not when her legs are completely numb. She fumbles with the remote, phone jammed between her shoulder and her ear, flips frantically through the channels until she sees the headline, and she knows what Linda is talking about.

Steven Westcott, Dad of Midtown, arrested on charges of child molestation

There is a rushing in May’s ears. She is floating; she is on another planet. That is Steven Westcott’s bloody, snarling face on the television. That is him being pressed into the backseat of a police car, shoulders almost blocking the doorway, just like they did when she first visited him all those months ago. That is the phrase she has had in the back of her mind for six months, but has been too afraid to allow to the front, too afraid to speak aloud.

It takes her a long, long time to realize Linda is speaking to her, even longer to understand what she is saying.

“—need someone to go to the hospital. Margaret? Are you listening to me? I need you to—”

“I told you,” May rasps. “I *told you*. Over and over I tried—and you let him—you let him—”

“Margaret, *please*.” May stops talking abruptly, breathing heavily through her nose, black spots dancing at the edges of her vision. Linda’s voice is so small. “We need to go to the hospital. We have to file a report.”

“No.” The word quavers, but May’s voice is strong. “No. You *stay away from this*. I go. Alone.”

And before Linda can object, May hangs up the phone.

It’s not a surprise to see Tony Stark at the hospital. By the time he shows up, May has spent hours trying to get past security; in that time, the story of what happened with Spider-Man and Westcott has come to light.

She is not surprised, either, when he casts her out, banishes her from seeing Peter. Tells her, bitterly, that she has done enough.

She deserves it. She has done more than enough damage to last a lifetime. *Did you know?* he asked. And May couldn't answer.

In the parking lot, she gets into her car without making a sound, and she drives away.

They fire Linda.

May has every intention of walking into the office the day after news of Westcott's arrest and Stark's subsequent pseudo-adoption of Peter goes public, but when she arrives it is to an empty desk in one corner and Linda's supervisor in another, begging her to stay on, at least until the fiasco is sorted.

May doesn't know why she says yes. She doesn't know why she is doing anything anymore. She has disappeared from herself.

She stays.

For a long time, there is almost nothing. Her days become an insensate blank. She knows she is moving through them, doing her job, but it is like she is watching herself from the outside, from above. The only times she is even remotely present are the moments she is following up on Peter. Watching the story of Westcott and Stark on the news. Watching Pepper Potts defend Peter. Watching everyone else turn against him. Her fault. She won't cause more ruin.

She stays away.

The charges against Westcott are dropped. May feels like she wants to die.

Peter comes forward, and the feeling only grows worse.

It is too much. Hasn't he already done enough? Haven't they made him suffer enough?

And yet, the day of the hearing, she finds herself driving not to the office, but to the courthouse. She looks dowdy and exhausted—just like every other clerk and paralegal in the building—and so she slips through the crowd of well-dressed, coiffed reporters, through the entrance hall and to the closed door that separates the courtrooms from the rest of the building. And there she sees him.

He has gained some weight since the picture of him and Stark leaving the hospital was released. Gotten a haircut too. In his suit he looks almost like an adult, *would* look like an adult, were it not

for the woman—Pepper Potts—sitting beside him, resting a gentle hand on his forearm and speaking quietly into his ear. Like a mother.

Does May want him to look up? To see her? What would she do if he did? What would she say?

Everything she has thought and imagined over the last year and a half has been nullified, voided by her many failures. Even if he did look up, there would be nothing she could say. Nothing she would have the right to say.

May goes home.

And Westcott goes free.

May watches the news of the judge's decision, and she cracks wide open. Split down the middle. Disintegrated.

With this disintegration, clarity:

Whatever she does now, the consequences do not matter—not for her, anyway. But maybe, just maybe, this verdict is a blessing in disguise. Maybe it is her one last chance to do good for Peter, before she disappears forever.

May Parker has failed. Margaret Esposito has failed. There is no redeeming either of them; they are already dead.

And the dead face no consequences.

May gets to work.

Happiness, Part 2

May stares into the depths of her untouched coffee as she finishes. Tony has the sense she is afraid to look up and see the expression on their faces—afraid she will see rejection there.

There is no rejection on Tony's face, as far as he can tell. Not if it matches what he is feeling.

What he is feeling is awe.

"I know it doesn't undo any of it," May says. "You have no idea how many times I've gone over everything in my head over the last year and a half, how many times I've thought... if I had just done things differently, where would we all have ended up? What if I hadn't lost my temper with the Arlingtons? What if I had put my mom in a home the moment Maggie died? Or what if I just hadn't divorced Ben in the first place?" She takes a deep breath. "That's the one I think about the most."

Finally, May looks up. Right at Peter, who is staring at her with his mouth closed but his eyes wide, hands clenched into fists on the tabletop.

"I loved your uncle," says May softly. "I never stopped loving him, even when things were bad between us."

"He loved you too." Peter's voice sounds hoarse, but it comes tumbling out of his mouth immediately, almost thoughtlessly. "He always loved you. He even said it."

May manages a quivering smile. It fades almost instantly.

"I should have been there for you," she says. "I should have been there the moment he died. I'll never stop regretting that. And not just because I loved him. Because I—because nothing that happened to you after should have happened. I should have been there."

Peter swallows, hard.

"I thought... when you didn't show up, I thought it was because you hated me. Because I—because he wouldn't have been out that night if it hadn't been for me. Because it was my fault he died."

May shakes her head so ferociously a tear—the first she has allowed herself all night—spills out of the corner of her eye.

"No," she says. "No, *no*. Listen to me, honey. What happened to your uncle was a terrible, terrible accident, and I never, ever thought it was your fault. Not for one second."

Peter's hands start to tremble.

"He wouldn't have been out if it wasn't for me. If I hadn't been mad at him, he wouldn't have been out. If I hadn't—"

"Peter." For the first time since she started talking, May leans across the table, just slightly.

"Honey, do you know how many teenagers do stuff like that? Who sneak out of the house or steal their parents' cars or get drunk at parties just because their dad or their mom pissed them off? Every single one of them. Every single one, and the ones who don't do it when they're your age are just saving it for college, or it'll come out in bad ways when they're adults, believe me. You

weren't being bad or wrong—you were doing what every kid since the beginning of time has done, and if what happened to you happened to all of them there would be nobody left in this stupid world. Your uncle dying was *not your fault*, do you hear me?"

It is Peter's turn to cry. A single tear drips down his cheek. He doesn't wipe it away.

"You don't hate me," he says.

"Never. Never. Honey, I—" May bites her lip, then takes a deep breath, as if steeling herself to speak—unsure, maybe, of what she's about to say, but determined to say it anyway. "Peter, I love you. That's why I looked for you. I wasn't doing it because I felt an obligation to your uncle, or because I was guilty—even though I am. I did it because I love you. And there's nothing you could do to erase that. I will always love you, Peter Benjamin Parker. No matter what."

Now, at last, May reaches across the table, across the space between them. She reaches for Peter's hand.

Tony almost stops her. His own hands twitch away from his long-cold coffee, contemplating reaching for hers. Peter has not let anyone touch him since the trial—not Pepper, not his friends, no one. But before Tony can make the decision, May has closed the divide: she takes Peter's hand in both of hers, holds it tight.

Peter doesn't pull away. He doesn't even twitch. He hesitates, maybe, but only for a second before—he squeezes back.

Tony glances at Pepper. She sees it too, and from the expression on her face, she is experiencing something similar to what Tony himself feels: a tightening of the stomach; a sensation that is so physical, at first, it takes some time for him to recognize the emotions producing it.

Wonder. Hope. And a little fear, too. The intensity of his own feeling for the people sitting beside him—and, incredibly, the one sitting across from him, though he's only known the real her for a few hours—is so large. It is so large, and Tony feels like he is only really becoming aware of that largeness in this moment, aware of the frightening implications of it, of what it would mean to lose it.

He can't articulate any of it. Peter is speaking again.

"You were looking for me the whole time," Peter says softly.

It's not a question. It doesn't even seem to be directed at May. Peter says it like he can't quite believe it, like he is only testing the words to see if they could possibly prove true. But May answers anyway.

"I was looking for you the whole time."

Peter's lips twitch. It's quavery, small and hesitant. But there is no mistaking it: he's smiling.

It doesn't last long. With a jolt, he seems to suddenly realize he and May are not the only people in the room. Peter glances at Pepper and Tony and some of the tightness immediately returns to his shoulders. The smile fades.

Slowly, gently, he pulls his hand out of hers.

"Um," he says. "I don't—"

But May shakes her head before he can say it. “I’m not—Peter, I don’t need anything. You don’t have to—”

“Do you want him?”

That’s Tony’s voice, rising out of his chest almost of its own accord. He puts a hand on Pepper’s knee as all three of them look around at him, and says it again.

“Do you want him? You still want him. Don’t you?”

May’s expression is strained. She looks like she is holding back an entire flood using just the strength of her body, and it is a strength that is waning. Still, when she speaks, it is in a measured voice. Her words are carefully selected. She addresses them to Peter.

“I just wanted... I just wanted to make sure you knew. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t have to feel burdened by not knowing. I wanted... if that was a weight you were carrying, Peter, I wanted to make sure you didn’t have to carry it anymore. And that’s all. For the rest... it doesn’t matter what I want. It matters what you need.”

Peter stares at her, eyes shining, mouth closed.

Tony leans forward.

“Okay,” he says. “But let’s pretend I’m not so great with the abstract concepts for just a second. You didn’t trudge barefoot through hell for a year and a half just so you could pop up to the penthouse and then peace out for the rest of his life. So give it to me straight: do you still want him?”

“Tony.”

Pepper’s voice is low, almost a warning. Tony glances at her and sees the tightness remains in her expression, but he doesn’t address it. At least, not directly.

He turns back to May, raises both eyebrows.

May pulls her hands back into her lap.

“I—” She looks at Peter, then back at Tony. “There isn’t anything—”

“Yes or no, May.”

“Tony,” says Pepper.

“It’s a simple question, it’s—”

“Yes,” says May. “Yes, I still want him. I’m always going to want him, but it’s *not* a simple question. For one, I still have a restraining order. For another, I’ve been committing fraud for an entire year in order to break that restraining order, I” —she laughs, a little hysterically— “God, if anyone even found out I was *here* I would be arrested, and I—”

“CPS aren’t Peter’s guardians anymore,” says Tony. “I am. So let’s pretend for a second the restraining order isn’t a factor. What’s your thought here, May? What’s your best-case scenario?”

“Tony, that’s—”

“Why is everyone looking at me like I’m crazy?” Tony throws up his hands, cutting across Pepper.

“For that matter, why do you all look like you’re on your way to a day in traffic court? This is good. This is great. Peter—”

“I want to stay here.”

They all swing around to look at Peter. He is looking at the tabletop, but when the eyes of the adults surrounding him find him, he looks up with what appears to be a considerable effort. He forces himself to look at May, who is clenching her jaw as she looks back.

“I think...” Peter swallows, hard. “I think I need to stay here. I—Mr. Stark—I mean, Tony and Pepper, they...” He trails off helplessly, but he does not look away from May.

Tony glances down. Under the table, Peter is clenching his hands into fists on his knees, the way he only does when he is battling some unspoken—or unspeakable—emotion. When Tony looks up again, Peter’s throat is working, but he can’t seem to find any words.

Before Tony can find his own, May replies.

“They take care of you,” she says.

Peter nods.

“You like it here.”

He nods again. Finally, he lowers his eyes. Then, voice hoarse, Peter says, “I’m really sorry.”

May shakes her head, hard and fierce.

“Don’t apologize,” she says sharply. “Honey, look at me.”

Now, when Peter raises his gaze, it is reluctant. But he does it all the same. May reaches across the table and she takes his chin in her hand, gently, to hold his eye. Once again Peter does not flinch away. It seems, in fact, that he is trying not to lean further into her touch.

“Peter,” says May, “don’t you apologize. Don’t you dare. I don’t ever want you to make a decision that’s wrong for you just to make someone else happy, okay? Not for me. Not for anyone. You are allowed to choose your own happiness. And if being here makes you happy, I would never, ever take that away from you. Do you hear me?”

Peter’s eyes begin to shine, but the shine doesn’t quite turn into tears. He nods. May, whose eyes are similarly shiny, moves her hand from his chin, up to his cheek. She says, “I’m so proud of you, Peter.”

She lowers her hand. Peter leans forward slightly, then rocks back.

“Maybe...,” he says. “Maybe we could... see each other sometimes? Like... after school, or... I don’t know. If you’re going to stay in the city, or—”

“I am,” says May quickly. She is blinking viciously, but will not allow her own tears to fall. “I’ll be here. And I would... I would love to see you. You’re always, always welcome. If... if it’s okay with Tony and Pepper. You can come over any time.”

“You mean I could come home?”

Peter seems to notice the longing in his own voice only after the question is out. He snaps his mouth shut, glances at Tony and Pepper, but it’s too late to take it back now. Peter looks at his

hands.

“I—” May begins.

But that is as much of this painful dance of avoidance that Tony can stand to witness. Before May can say another word, he gets abruptly to his feet. Everyone startles.

“Sorry,” he says. “Sorry, May. Pete. Could we—May, would you excuse us for a quick sec? I think we need to have a little family discussion, if that’s alright.”

May nods. Pepper, frowning, gets to her feet, and Peter follows, though he still seems reluctant to let May out of his sight. He cranes his neck around as Tony leads them out of the kitchen and down the main hallway, into his and Pepper’s bedroom, where he flips on the light and closes the door, then immediately says, “Kid. What the hell are you doing out there?”

Peter, frozen by the doorway, looking like he is using every ounce of his willpower not to turn around and try to see if he can continue staring at May through the solid wood of the door, says, “What—what do you mean?”

“That. That out there. You, lying through your teeth. You want to go with her.”

Peter swallows.

Before he can answer, Pepper reaches out. She takes him gently by the elbow, and though Peter does not flinch away, he does not lean into the touch, like he did with May. He does, however, allow Pepper to lead him away from the door, toward the chair by the bed—the same one she sat in, some months ago, the night she and Tony rescued Peter from the warehouse. Peter sits in it, and Pepper perches on the edge of the bed, facing him. She waits until Tony sits beside her to speak.

“Tony’s right,” she says. “Peter, sweetie, it’s written all over your face. You want to go with her.”

Peter grimaces, strained.

“It’s not—it’s not that I don’t like living here. I do. *I really* do. And it’s not that I don’t *want* to live here, it’s just...” He lets out a short, shaky breath. “She just... she wanted me the whole time. I thought... I thought nobody wanted me.”

The tightness has returned to Tony’s stomach. He glances at Pepper to see if she is feeling the same thing, but if she is she does not let it show. She leans forward and puts one hand over Peter’s, which is still clenched on his knee.

“She loves you,” Pepper says.

Peter nods, the movement small, almost like he can’t believe it.

“For the record, Peter, we love you too.”

Pepper looks to Tony, who coughs roughly.

“Uh,” he says, “Pepper is in charge of the feelings department of this, um, collaboration—partnership—”

“Relationship,” Pepper corrects.

Tony softens. “Right. Relationship. So—”

“Tony.”

Pepper and Peter are both watching him. Tony relaxes. Smiles at them both. The tightness is turning into warmth.

“Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, kid. We love you too.”

That same small, hesitant smile Peter wore when May confirmed that she had been looking for him is back. He doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t have to.

Tony goes on.

“Which is why we share the same sentiment as your aunt. Peter, don’t make this choice because you think it’s going to make us happy. You being happy will make us happy. Whatever that means.”

The smile slips. “No,” Peter says. “I meant it. I *want* to live here. But I...”

“You also want to live there.”

Peter bites his lip. He nods.

Tony claps his hands together, holds them out to the sides.

“Well—then what the hell are we sitting around looking like the doom and gloom squad for? Peter—this is great.”

“I don’t—”

“No, listen. Look, if divorced parents do it all the time, we can sure as heck figure something out. I already like May one hell of a lot better than I like any of my exes. So I’m thinking—what works best, Pep? Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday in Queens, Thursday, Friday here? We can switch off weekends. Boom. Problem solved. Let’s—”

“Tony.”

This time it’s not Pepper cutting across him. It is Peter, voice as solemn as Tony has ever heard it, and he stops talking abruptly.

Peter takes a deep breath.

“She doesn’t know what she’s getting into,” he says.

Pepper and Tony exchange a crestfallen glance.

“You mean—?”

Peter pulls his StarkPhone out of his back pocket. He spends a moment fumbling with the screen, then holds it out to them. On it, in bold, bright letters, is a headline:

SPIDER-MAN VINDICATED?

Westcott re-arrested, charged with child molestation

That's all Tony gets to see before Peter lowers the phone.

"I don't know what you did," says Peter quietly, "but everyone is talking about it. They're saying he confessed."

"Oh. Oh, Pete. I'm—I'm sorry, I meant to talk to you about all of this, I just—your aunt showed up and I—"

"Tony," says Peter, "thank you."

Tony swallows.

"I want you to be happy too," he says. "That's all I've wanted since the night of the plane crash. And if going with your aunt is going to make you happy, Peter, you have to do it."

But Peter shakes his head.

"It's one thing living here," he says. "You guys know what you're doing. You—it might not always be easy, taking care of me, but at least you know what to expect. She doesn't. She doesn't know I'm Spider-Man. And I can't lie to her, and I can't—I can't drag her into all of it without her knowing. What if I put her in danger? That's not fair, not when she doesn't understand what she's signing up for. And you know I can't—especially now that there's a chance everyone might believe me, I can't—"

"You can't not be Spider-Man," Tony says.

Peter nods.

Tony leans forward now, urgent.

"Peter," he says, "the entire time I've known you, you have spent so much time and energy choosing between terrible things in order to make this world a little better for other people. But bud, what if this doesn't have to be a choice? What if you can live here, and with your aunt, *and* be Spider-Man? Because all of those things are open to you, right here, right now. You just have to take them."

"But May—"

"Kid, that woman dragged herself across the surface of an angry sun in order to find you. If there was anyone else in this world besides me and Pepper that I would trust to stare down the bullshit that comes with being a superhero without flinching, it's her."

Peter grits his teeth. He breathes through his nose, heavy, face crumpled, and he says, "What if... what if I tell her and she doesn't want me anymore?"

"If you tell her and that happens, I will literally eat my left foot. That's how surprised I would be, and how confident I am that it's not going to happen. But... if it did, well, then nothing changes. Okay? You still have me, and Pepper, and your friends. You still get to go back to school. You'll always have a home here, Pete, you got that?"

Peter nods, slowly. He worries his lower lip between his teeth a while before replying.

"But it still should be her choice, right? I can't just expect her to... to.... And if she *does* find out

the truth and then she doesn't—doesn't think I'm—"

Just like in the kitchen, Tony gets to his feet, startling Peter and Pepper with his abruptness.

"Why are we sitting around here debating?" he says. "There's an easier way to test this."

And with that, Tony strides out of the room.

He hears Pepper and Peter follow him, hears Pepper's whispered questions and Peter's feeble protests, but he ignores them as he re-enters the kitchen, where May is still seated at the table, still staring at her coffee. From the redness around her eyes and nose, she finally let loose some of the tears she has been holding back all night, but as soon as she spots the returning troupe she wipes her face and sits up straight.

"Hi," she says, "I'm—"

"Quick question," says Tony. "Hypothetical, I hope, but bear with me. Let's say Peter went nuts—I'm talking total psycho stuff, here—and, I don't know... threw me off the top of a high rise. What's your move, May? Turn him in? Sell it to the tabloids? First thought, top of your head. Go."

May, clearly bewildered, looks between Pepper—who is wearing her patented expression of exasperation—to Peter, who looks just as bewildered as May does. When neither of them can offer any explanation for Tony, May says, "I guess... I start looking for a shovel?"

Tony throws Peter, who is slowly turning deep red, a pointed look.

"Neat," says Tony. "Awesome. Okay, round two. Let's say—once again, hypothetically—that Peter had a secret. How horrible would that secret have to be in order for you to put on your walking boots and hike out of his life forever?"

Immediately, May's face softens into a look of comprehension. The wrinkles leave her forehead. A small smile arrives on her lips.

"You mean, a secret like... if he was actually a vigilante superhero? Like if he spent his free time swinging through the city, helping people who couldn't help themselves? Like that kind of secret?"

A face-splitting grin immediately breaks out on Tony's face. Beside him, Peter looks absolutely gobsmacked.

"Yeah," says Tony, "like that kind of secret."

May nods. "Well," she says, stepping out from behind the table and looking directly at Peter, now. "If Peter *did* have that kind of secret... I guess, hypothetically, I would have to tell him how... absolutely amazing I thought that was. I guess I'd have to tell him that before, I didn't think it was possible for me to be more proud of him than I already was, but knowing what he did—how he helped other people, how he helped other kids, even when it was the hardest thing in the world—makes me so proud I barely know what to do with myself."

The tenuous stoicism Peter was displaying earlier, when he told May he could not go with her, breaks away entirely. His whole body seems to sag with what she has just said—not like her words are heavy. Like they have freed him from a terrible weight.

"You... you know?"

"It... was only a hunch at first. Not knowing if you were alive it... it was unbearable. And then

Tony showed up, looking for Spider-Man. And I talked to Mr. Delmar. But I wasn't sure until... that night. The night you took the kids." Her voice breaks, just slightly. "You shouldn't have had to do that. Not on your own. We—it shouldn't have been on you. But I'm so proud of you for doing it. For doing all of it."

"It doesn't... knowing that I'm... it doesn't make you...?"

"Scared?" May finishes for him. "I'd be lying if I said it doesn't. But not for me, Peter. I want you to be safe. I want... I don't want you to always have to feel like the weight of the entire world is on your shoulders. You've already done so much."

"I—," says Peter, "it's—it's not like that. I know it seems like... like this huge thing, this huge... responsibility, being Spider-Man. And it is, I guess, but that's not what it feels like. Even when everything else is hard, being him—it just feels like being *me*."

At her sides, May's arms give a spasm. But she doesn't raise them.

"It's not my place," she says. "I know it's not my place. And I know you already know this—I *hope* you already know this—but your uncle would have been so proud of you too."

For the first time since they exited the bedroom, a smile makes its way onto Peter's face. Hesitant, but there.

"You think so? Sometimes I feel like... sometimes I wonder what he would do if he had known all of this. I wonder if he would... I just, I think a lot about what he would say."

"I think... I think he would just want to know if you're happy. Are you happy, Peter?"

The smile fades from Peter's face. The corners of his lips twitch. For a moment he seems to recede into himself, and Tony is afraid May has said something wrong, and she seems to experience the same fear, because her arms once again spasm, and this time the spasm is accompanied by a frown, and a mouth that opens quickly, apology at the ready. But before she can say it, Peter nods.

"I am happy," he says. "I really am."

May's face softens. She smiles.

"Then Ben would be happy too. I'm sure of it."

Peter nods again, locking the affirmation in place, but his smile has not returned. His lips are pressed tightly together. He blinks rapidly.

"Is it—?" Peter takes a shaking breath. "Would it be okay if I...?"

His arms twitch, exactly the way May's have been, and that is all the signal May needs. She steps forward, closing the space between her body and his, and pulls Peter into a hug.

Tony, always on his guard about Peter's personal space, almost expects him to pull away. At the very least, he expects hesitation, tenseness, uncertainty. But there is none. Peter leans into his aunt's arms like he is climbing aboard a lifeboat in high seas; like they are the rescue he has been waiting for all along. He wraps his arms around her too, grips the back of her shirt with both hands and buries his face in her shoulder, both of them whispering words Tony cannot hear.

Tony glances at Pepper. She is watching the hug with tears in her eyes, but he still manages to catch her attention.

Tony winks. Pepper nods.

They wait until the hug breaks apart on its own. When Peter finally—slowly, gently—disentangles himself from May’s arms, and allows her to hold onto his shoulders, to look him up and down and brush tears from his cheeks with the pads of her thumbs, only then does Tony clear his throat.

May and Peter turn to look at him, mild surprise on both their faces. They seem to have forgotten Tony and Pepper were in the room, but now they quickly remember it; Peter hastily wipes his face on his sleeve. May squeezes his hand, then releases it.

“Sorry,” she says. “Is it—?”

“Damn,” Tony interrupts, “you’re really good at the hypothetical game, Mrs. Parker. How’d you like to play another round? ‘Cuz as it turns out, Pepper and I have a proposition for you.”

The early winter sunlight is bright and cold, but inside the car is warm. There was a time, not so long ago, when the sharpness of this deceptive light would have brought with it a slicing fear—of impending night, of evaporating warmth, of a long winter to come—but today it is merely illuminating. New York City trawls past through the tinted windows, and the sky is so blue and the buildings so tall and clear and close they almost seem *too* real, *too* near. Like up until now he has only seen impressions of them, and is just now encountering the real thing.

It’s a comforting closeness. These are buildings he knows. His part of the city.

They’ve been mostly silent for the last ten minutes. There was some talk when Tony picked him up from school: Peter knows he is worried about the transition back into the public eye, worried what the other kids are saying now that Peter is back among them, worried that it will be too much too soon. The other kids *are* saying things, of course. Peter’s disappearance made him a favorite subject of sordid speculation; his subsequent reappearance and everything it entailed—the trial with Skip, the rumors about Spider-Man, the fact that he was suddenly under the legal guardianship of the richest and most famous man in the entire world—made him infamous. And now that he’s back at school he’s something else entirely: a living, breathing legend, walking among them.

Peter can’t pretend it isn’t strange, walking down the hall and hearing his name on every person’s lips, knowing that not all of them are speaking it with reverence, or even awe. But Peter isn’t lying, each day when Tony rolls up to the front of the school—in what he claims is an inconspicuous car, but which always immediately attracts the attention of everyone within a hundred-yard radius—when he says the whispers don’t bother him. Peter is glad to be back, glad to have Ned and Michelle. Glad to be creeping, however slowly, toward some semblance of normal—something he thought he might never have again.

Tony still worries. But this is okay too. It’s actually really good—another thing Peter thought he might never have again after Ben.

Speaking of worry—

“I can come up with you, you know.” Tony turns in his seat as they pull up to the curb, and Peter does the same, to face him. “Hell, I’ll crash on the couch if you want. The big bed is all on Pepper, I sleep better in cramped, uncomfortable spaces.”

Peter grins, but he shakes his head.

“I think I’ll probably be okay. But thanks, Tony.”

“Okay.” Tony twists his hands on the steering wheel; he looks more nervous than Peter. “Right. But you know you can call me for anything, right? Like, if May turns out to be a cyborg kidnapper, or—”

“Really?” Peter’s grin widens. He raises an eyebrow. “Cyborg kidnapper is your *first* worry?”

“Hey, I’m just freewheeling based on experience. Live with me a few more months and it won’t sound so outlandish, kiddo.”

“Yeah, well I guess we’ll see. You know you’re stuck with me, right?”

“Just until you turn eighteen. Then I’m turfing you. Turning the penthouse into a bachelor pad. I miss my wild days, and you’re cramping my style with the ladies.”

“Yeah, last year was a while ago. And you know Pepper likes me better than you.”

Tony laughs, though it’s a little short, a little strained. He exhales through his nose, surveying Peter from under a lowered brow, and Peter continues to smile at him—softer, maybe, than he would have smiled in the past, but, finally, just as genuine.

“You know I’m really proud of you, right Pete?”

Peter nudges Tony’s shoulder. “Jeez, Tony, you’re not dropping me off at my own funeral. I’ll be back on Thursday. Save the waterworks ‘til then.”

“I’m missing you less and less by the moment.”

Peter winks, opens the door, grabs the duffel bag at his feet, and gets out of the car.

“I’ll see you Thursday,” he says again, more firmly this time, because Tony’s hand is shifting toward his own door, like he means to follow Peter up anyway. “And I’ll call you.”

“Every night,” says Tony. “Like we discussed. Or Pepper will have a conniption.”

“Yeah. I’m sure she will.”

Peter turns away from the car. But he’s only made it two steps before Tony’s voice once again halts him.

“Pete?”

Peter turns around.

“You know I love you, right kid?”

Peter gives him one final grin.

“Yeah, I know,” he says. “I love you too.”

By the time Peter reaches the seventh floor of the apartment building, however, most of the easy confidence he had in the car has slipped away. It's not uncertainty—it's *familiarity*. As soon as the elevator doors shush open he is nearly bowled over by it: the hallways have not changed—not the carpet, the paint, the faint smell of old cigarette smoke and air freshener. Peter is so stunned by this sameness that he almost forgets to get off the elevator: he sticks his arm through the doors just before they close over him.

But of course everything is the same. It feels like decades since Peter left, but it has only been a little over a year and a half—a revelation that has him all the more discombobulated as he finally steps into the hallway and heads toward the apartment he used to share with Uncle Ben.

It's been a few weeks since May appeared at Tony's apartment. It took that long to get the restraining order lifted, though they have spent plenty of time together in the interim anyway. She quit her job at CPS, dyed her hair back to its normal color, and in between job searching she has spent almost every evening at the penthouse, sometimes planning for Peter's transition with Pepper and Tony but mostly just spending time with them. Catching up on all they've missed. Watching movies and making meals and working through all the necessary awkwardness that comes with the fact they're all suddenly a family—an awkwardness they have all approached with steadfastness and enthusiasm.

Still, the only time he has been alone with May since her reappearance was last week, when she picked him up from school and together they drove out to Coney Island, walked along the beach—stared at the long scar of charred earth where Peter brought the plane down, but did not linger—and waited until evening arrived, until the tourists dispersed from the beach and the sound of the arcade and amusement park died in the background, and then, just before the sun dipped beneath the horizon, took off their shoes and walked into the shallow, frigid water together. May had one arm wrapped around Peter's shoulders; the other held the box that contained Uncle Ben's ashes.

They spread them in the ocean together.

"Thank you," Peter said, "for everything you taught me."

The wind carried the ashes out across the water and past the horizon. There had been no reply.

When it was finished, Peter and May sat together silently on the shore a while, until the pink in the sky had faded into red, then finally blue, and when the temperature dipped below what was comfortable they got to their feet together and walked to the car, her arm still around his shoulder, tears on both of their faces.

It was a good farewell. They did it together.

That night, before she dropped him back off at Tony and Pepper's, May had pressed the key to the apartment into Peter's hand.

"When you're ready," she said.

Peter, standing outside the door to the apartment, stares down at that key now, small and cold in the palm of his hand, and, taking a deep breath, he inserts it in the lock and turns.

There is a brief moment of utter tension as Peter steps through the doorway and then—

Relief. All the strange familiarity of the hallway falls away the moment he is inside, replaced by a familiarity that is not strange at all: this is Peter's home. That's the ratty old couch on which he and Uncle Ben would sit and watch old movies together. That's the kitchen table, scratched and stained

where Peter drew on it as a kid. That's *him*, younger and scrawnier but the same nonetheless, smiling out from a dozen pictures along the wall. Those are his family members, smiling alongside him in those pictures—gone, but not nearly as gone as he used to think.

And that—that is his aunt, standing in the kitchen, smiling at him with tears in her eyes and holding a lopsided cake, on which she has written "*Welcome Home, Peter*" in red and blue letters.

There is no strangeness here. Only rightness.

"Hey, Aunt May," says Peter, shucking the duffel bag and his backpack as she sets the cake down on the counter. "I'm here."

May comes up to him, and she does what still only she can do—she wraps him in her arms and pulls him close, kisses his head and says,

"Hey you. I'm so glad you're home."

It's a quiet first night. They eat dinner together. May is a terrible cook, like Ben was, and Peter savors every bite. After dinner they cut into the cake, and talk a while, and rifle through Ben's movie collection but in the end do not watch anything—just sit together on the couch a while, shoulder to shoulder, becoming accustomed to one another's presence.

Peter knows it won't all be like this: there is still a pain in his chest, a tightness in his mind—a fear that all of it will come crashing down again. He still wakes up, most nights, covered in a cold sweat, fumbling in his covers for some purchase, some proof that he is not back at Skip's, or underneath the desk in the foreman's office. But it doesn't paralyze him anymore. He doesn't flee from it, and he doesn't hide it: he has people to tell about the nightmares. People to ride them out with him. The pain is ever-receding, and even if it will never be gone, he is starting to believe it will never take him under again. He is no longer alone.

So when, early in the evening, May shifts beside him and gets to her feet, Peter doesn't feel the terrible surge of foreboding he might have just a few months ago. He simply looks up, curious.

"I'm gonna clean up," she says. "Why don't you go check out your room, get settled in?"

"I can help," says Peter, getting to his feet, but she waves him off.

"It's your first night," says May. "I have the rest of your life to exploit you for free labor."

"I knew you had an ulterior motive letting me live here."

May kisses him on the cheek. This easy affection is another thing that is surprisingly familiar, in spite of the fact he never had it before, at least not with May. It never makes him feel anything other than safe.

"Holler if you need me," says May, and she retreats to the kitchen, leaving Peter to retrieve his things and head to the end of the hall, where his childhood bedroom waits.

Peter is ready for the wave of nostalgia this time, and so it doesn't exactly bowl him over, though it does catch in his chest, bring a little prickle to his eyes. May has, as she said, left everything more

or less untouched, though there are some small signs of outside intervention. Tony has definitely been here: even though he assured Peter he wouldn't "go crazy with the billionaire stuff" around May, he has still outfitted Peter's room with a brand-new laptop, a gaming system, a new set of sheets and pillows, and a closet full of clothes that render the duffel bag Peter brought redundant. It's actually pretty tame, all things considered: Peter guesses May stopped him before he could go any further.

Looking at all of it, Peter feels more gratitude for both of them than he has ever felt. The prickle in the backs of his eyes increases tenfold. He blinks rapidly, heading toward the bed, not wanting to get too overwhelmed on his first night with his Aunt and—

He spots a package on his bed. He has to blink a few times to make sure he isn't imagining it: it's wrapped in newspaper, and almost blends in with the black-and-white comforter. But it's there: about the size of a book and loosely tied with twine.

He picks it up. There is a note taped to the front. It says *This belongs to you. Don't forget to call. Feelings department still says we love you. T.S.*

A smile is making its way onto Peter's face, but he doesn't unwrap the package, not yet. He has just noticed what the paper in which it is wrapped says. It is *The New York Times*, and the headline, splashed in almost ridiculously large letters across the front page, says:

WE ♥ SPIDER-MAN

The vigilante stood against the world to defend what was right: wherever you are, Spidey, we thank you.

Peter stares at the headline for a moment, taking it in, willing himself to believe it—and then, carefully, he peels the newspaper away, revealing his suit.

Putting it on is as much of a homecoming as anything that has happened today. It is like returning to his own skin; his whole body tingles with excitement as it tightens around him, heart pounding in anticipation.

"Hey."

Peter whirls around. May is standing in the doorway to his bedroom, arms folded over her chest, a slight frown on her face as she takes in the costume. Peter's heart pounds harder, not with eager anticipation but with worry. She has never seen him in the suit before. Maybe seeing it will make it too real. Maybe she will finally recognize the danger she is in, the danger *he* puts her in and she will—

"You have money?"

Peter's mouth falls open.

"I'm... what?"

"Money, honey. You have some?"

Peter is shocked. He almost can't talk.

“I... have, like, twenty in cash. Tony gave me a card but I can’t, um, in the suit—”

May nods, reaches into her back pocket, and hands him fifty dollars. Peter can feel his ears burning, but she closes his hand around it before he can refuse.

“Snacks,” she says. “And emergency money. And if you need anything, you call me. Don’t think you have to take down any airplanes on your own or... whatever, okay? Call.”

“You’re... gonna help me take down an airplane?”

Finally, May smiles. “Okay, well, maybe call Tony for that one.” She reaches out, ruffles his hair. “Ten o’clock, you hear me? And you text me every hour until then.”

Peter’s senses are beginning to return. The money in his hand crinkles as he tightens his fist around it. It’s his turn to try on a tentative smile.

“You know ten is when all the good crime starts, right May?”

“Why do you think that’s your curfew?” She kisses him on the temple. “I am so, so proud of you, kiddo. Be safe. And go get ‘em, Spider-Man.”

He sees it in her face when she pulls away: fear, certainly, but only a little bit—the same sort Tony was wearing earlier in the car. Mostly it’s exactly what she said it was: mostly, she just looks proud.

Peter takes it in as long as he can. And then, with one final wink from May, he turns away from her, toward the window, and he pulls on his mask.

New York is waiting for him.

Peter leaps.

Ben and May divorced before Peter's parents died, so when Ben is murdered Peter goes into foster care. It takes just a tiny taste of superpowers for Peter to decide he doesn't want to put up with his horrible foster father anymore—the streets are infinitely more appealing. All he wants is to be Spider-Man anyway.

So he leaves.

Simple.

Simple, that is, until Iron Man needs Spider-Man's help. Peter isn't about to turn down an opportunity to fight alongside Tony Freaking Stark, but he also isn't going to let his hero know that his recruit is a fifteen-year-old homeless dropout. So they strike a deal. Peter will help Tony. In return, the mask stays on. And that's when things get complicated.